THRILLING

NO. 14 • FALL 1969 ICD 50¢

SCIENCE FICTION

BIG NEW COLLECTION ADVENTURES

INVADERS FROM THE MONSTER WORLD
by Edmond Hamilton

FLIGHT TO DISHONOR
by Gerald Vance

PROUD ASTEROID
by Paul W. Fairman

THE CURSE
by Ivar Jorgenson

LUNAR LEGACY
by Charles Recour

GOOD LUCK, COLUMBUS
by Frank Robinson

THE IRON MEN OF VENUS
by Don Wilcox

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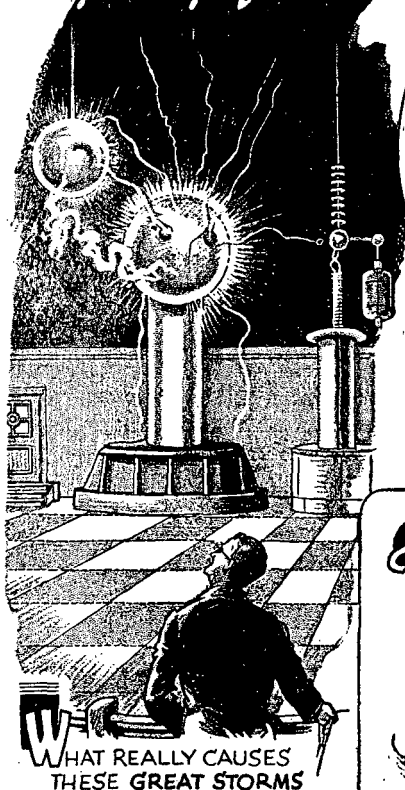
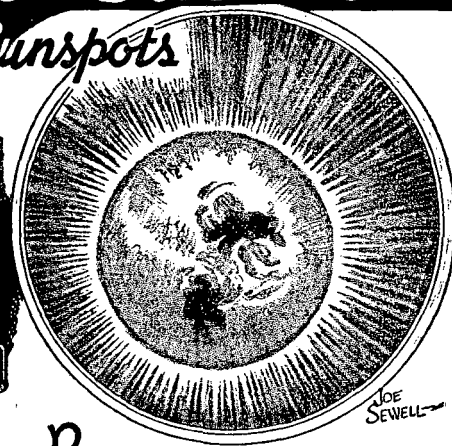
RIDDLES OF SCIENCE

Mystery of the Sunspots



WHAT REALLY CAUSES THESE **GREAT STORMS** ON THE **SUN**? IS IT A BREAKDOWN OF **ATOMS** IN THE SUN? DOES THE ANSWER THE **ATOMS SMASHERS** ARE SEEKING LIE HERE?



PERIODICALLY, OUR **SUN** DEVELOPS A RASH OF **SPOTS** ON ITS FACE WHICH SCIENTISTS SAY CAUSE GREAT **MAGNETIC STORMS** . .

THESE **STORMS** CAN BECOME SO INTENSE, CROSSING 93 MILLION MILES OF SPACE, AS TO **DISRUPT** RADIO COMMUNICATION, TELEGRAPH SERVICE, AND EVEN SHORT CIRCUIT POWER LINES.

WHAT *really causes sunspots? Science would be very much interested in discovering the answer to this mystery.* The sun is the powerhouse of the solar system. Within its bulk enormous energies are fostered. Are they so tremendous that the secret of atomic disruption could be answered by a study of sunspots? Are sunspots vast explosions caused by the breakdown of atoms inside the sun, and the release of tremendous storms of energy that are capable of crossing 93 millions of miles of space to Earth? Scientists seek the answer, because it may mean a great advance in civilization.

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A BIG NEW COLLECTION

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DON WILCOX	4	THE IRON MEN OF VENUS
CHARLES RECOUR	46	LUNAR LEGACY
GERALD VANCE	56	FLIGHT TO DISHONOR
FRANK ROBINSON	70	GOOD LUCK, COLUMBUS
EDMOND HAMILTON	80	INVADERS FROM THE MONSTER WORLD
IVAR JORGENSON	112	THE CURSE
PAUL W. FAIRMAN	120	PROUD ASTEROID

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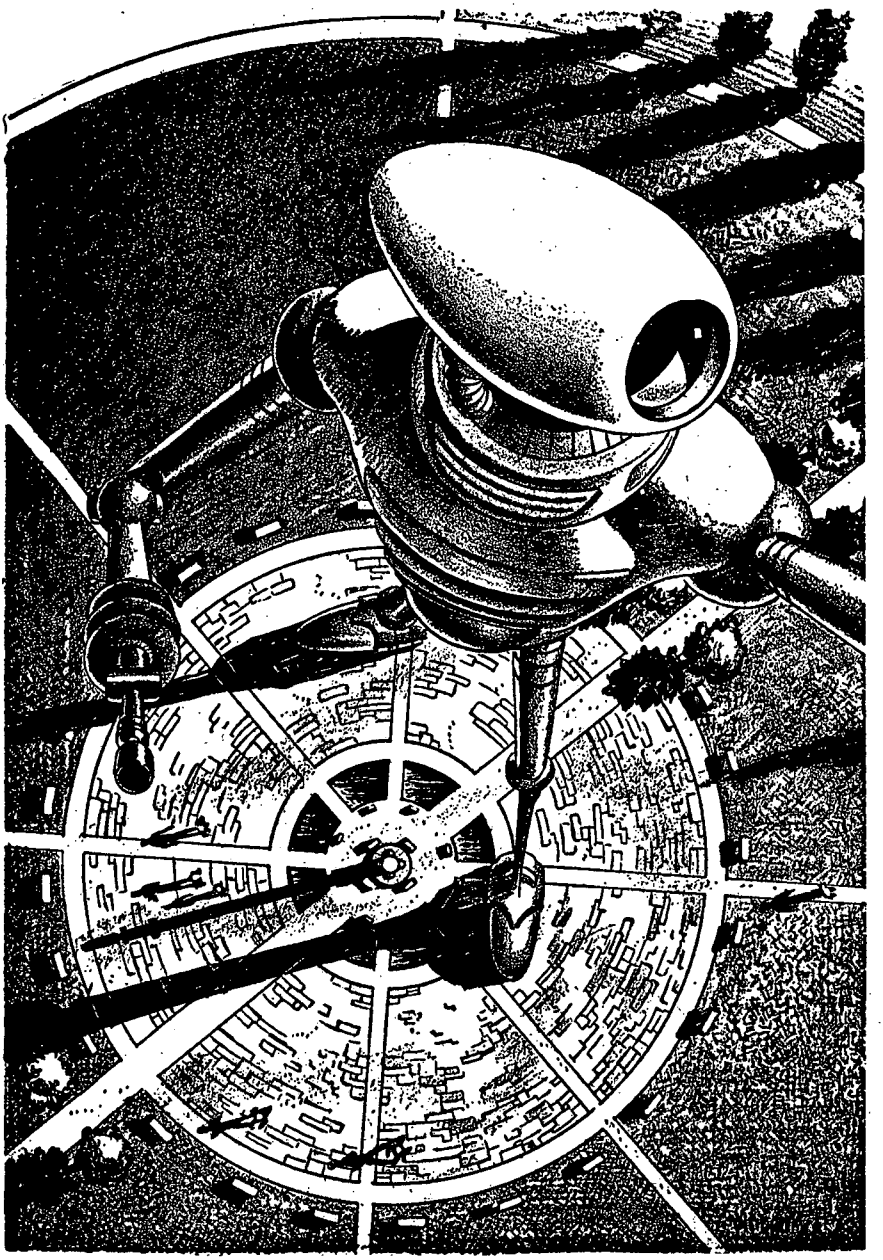

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THE IRON MEN OF VENUS

BY DON WILCOX

At that height the woman's screams echoed thinly and the child's cry went unheard

To be sent a red knife meant you were on the Venusian murder list — with a giant robot to kill you off in style!

THEY HAD placed the red knife on the table and Joe Kane saw it there when he took the witness chair. It stood pointing straight up like a candlestick, resting on the squared-off end of the white handle. The blade glistened red, not blood red but the deep metallic red of Venus steel. Joe's lips went dry as the men fired questions at him.

"Your name?... Address?... Age?... Occupation?..."

Joe was twenty-seven. He lived in one of the low-priced underground apartment houses. He was a trouble shooter on an interplanetary freight line.

"Now, Mr. Kane, do you recognize this knife?"

"That particular knife? No."

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"You've never seen such a knife before?"

"I've seen *such* knives—yes. Everyone has. Pictures of them, anyway. Anyone that reads the newspapers—"

"What does the knife mean to you, Mr. Kane?"

"It's a Venus knife. It's made of Venus steel." Joe wondered what all this had to do with him. He wished they would get on with it. Staying away from work was costing him eight dollars an hour.

"Go on, Mr. Kane. Tell us what this particular Venus knife means."

Joe's grey eyes narrowed. He knew the face of this important man barking the questions. This was Paul Maddergall, the big-shot investigator who often made the headlines. His face reminded Joe of an arrowhead, blunt of features and hard as flint. He wore a fresh red bow tie, and Joe thought the red of the Venus knife reflected in his glittering dark eyes.

"You're stalling, Mr. Kane. What is the meaning of this knife? Isn't it a symbol of some kind?"

"It's a sign of danger. They say it's a threat of death." Joe's brain was in a whirl. How did these questions concern him?

"A threat from whom, Mr. Kane? From whom?"

"From the Killers that live on the Storm Continent of Venus. It's the special trade mark of the criminal colony."

"Did you call them *Killers*, Mr. Kane?"

"That's what they call them in the newspapers."

Maddergall gave a sly smile. The other men around the table shuffled restlessly, but Maddergall would not be hurried. "*Killers* is a very strong term, Mr. Kane. We do carry on commerce with them, don't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"We recognize them as an interplanetary colony, don't we?"

"Yes, sir. I understand they were originally a criminal colony."

"Originally—yes. A few generations ago—but let that pass. The point is, you have called them Killers. That makes them sound like savages or wild animals. Isn't it true, Mr. Kane, that they are human beings—like you and me?"

"They're not like me," Joe said sharply. He saw that some of the men around the table were suppressing smiles. The chairman called for order. Anger showed in Paul Maddergall's stony face.

"Meaning what?" Maddergall barked.

"They're bloodthirsty and dangerous, and they'd like to take revenge on the earth by sticking knives in our backs—that's what I read in the papers." Joe did his best to hold his voice calm. "They've been bumping off our ships right and left."

MADDERGALL rose from his chair heavily and began to pace. For a man in his mid-thirties, he was old—old and brittle and cutting in his manner. The reporters at the side of the room watched him closely. Now he began firing questions like a machine gun. Joe's face grew warm, his answers confused. Suddenly, to his relief, the door opened and a uniformed porter called in.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but is Mr. Joe Kane in here? I have a message for Joe Kane."

The chairman started to order the porter out. "No interruptions, please. Mr. Kane is busy. Sergeant-at-arms, please remove—"

But Joe had risen instantly. The porter was ushered out, the door was closed, and again the room came to order.

"We were speaking of the red knife," Maddergall resumed, gesturing

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toward Exhibit A in the center of the table. "Mr. Kane, if you discovered such a knife on your desk, point up—as the late Senator Droondair did—what would you conclude?"

"That someone from the Venus Storm Continent had put it there—"

"And—"

"And that he intended to murder me."

"Now we're getting somewhere. By the way, what *did* happen to Senator Droondair?"

"He was murdered."

"Why, Mr. Kane? What was back of that cruel assassination?"

Joe touched his perspiring temples. "Well, I read an article about the case—"

"Speak up, Joe Kane. Why do you think Senator Droondair was murdered?"

"I suppose it was on account of the Droondair Bill. He wanted a law to abolish trade with the colony."

THE CHAIRMAN, John H a large, black-haired man with frosted eyebrows, rose and tapped the table with the gavel. Time was short, he said. The questioners must bear in mind that Joe Kane was not being tried for the murder of Senator Droondair or anyone else. "There are no charges against Joe Kane, gentlemen. We're looking for his older brother, Ruppert Kane. Joe may be able to help us locate him. Please confine your questions—"

So it was Ruppert they wanted! Joe's worries shifted gears. Whatever these men were trying to get at, Joe's instant determination to protect his brother was full of complications. Ruppert, a playboy planet-trotter, had hobnobbed with the Venus Killers as though they were fraternity brothers.

"You have two brothers? Correct?"

"Correct."

"The youngest is a pilot on a Mars line?"

"Yes, sir. That's Lanny. He's a good pilot."

"And Ruppert, the oldest—" Here Maddergall began sniping in earnest. He asked a dozen questions about Ruppert's space travels, never waiting for an answer. When he paused, Joe admitted in bewilderment, "That's Ruppert, all right. He does get around."

"He is known to have visited the penal colony on Venus?"

"Yes."

"Several times?"

"Yes."

"He must have friends in that colony."

"That's possible. He's interested in all kinds of people, good and bad."

"Even the so-called Killers?"

Joe hesitated. "I guess he figures they're human beings, like you and me."

Again the smiles around the table broke in upon Maddergall's severity. His flinty eyes went ablaze with a dangerous fury. "Mr. Kane, your impertinence impresses no one. You will confine your answers to *yes* or *no*. Did your brother Ruppert ever possess a knife like this?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Did he ever lend it to you?"

Joe's teeth tightened. "I said that he never, to my knowledge—"

"Answer *yes* or *no*! Did he ever lend his knife to you?"

"No!"

"Then you admit he possessed such a knife?"

"No, I did not admit—"

"And he refused to lend it to you."

Joe leaned forward his fists clenched. "He did *not* refuse to lend it. I said—"

"Oh, then he did lend it to you? That's what we wanted to know."

"He did not. How could he, when he didn't even—"

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"Mr. Kane, you're confusing your story like a school boy who has ditched. Now think, and answer me *yes* or *no*. Did your brother Ruppert ever lend you his Venus knife?"

"No."

Maddergall turned to the others with a concluding gesture. "There, the investigating committee will please note that Joe Kane has admitted, under oath, that his brother Ruppert, a friend of the Venus Killers, did possess a Venus knife of the sort used for death threats—perhaps the same knife used to threaten the late Senator Droondair."

Joe's brain spun. He saw the news reporters jump for the telephones, and he could imagine the black headlines. Guilt flooded through him. Somehow, in his confusion, he had let Ruppert down. But it was all a mistake. He hadn't said those things. He hadn't—

He blurted, "It's a lie! I didn't say it. You can't print those things." He sprang from his chair and tried to make a path for Maddergall. "I won't stand for all this. My brother is innocent. If they print what you said, I'll—I'll—"

He came at Maddergall, not sure what he was doing or saying. The men seized him, caught his arms, and held him back. At the same time Paul Maddergall grabbed the knife. At the sight of Maddergall's action, Joe stopped cold. He yelled out, and his tone was a hiss of accusation.

"Look at that! The guy grabs a Venus knife. Look at him! He's threatening me! Giving me the death threat!"

The sergeant-at-arms slapped a hand over Joe's mouth and flung him back to his seat. Joe bounced up, holding out his open hands to show he hadn't intended to fight—he only wanted them to see Maddergall and the knife. But he didn't get a chance to say what was in his mind. The sergeant-at-arms plunged at him again with a swinging fist that might have been a baseball bat as far as Joe was concerned. The blow caught him on the jaw and knocked him sprawling across the floor.

CHAPTER II

HE LIMPED down the steps, paused to take a deep breath, and turned to look back at the building from which he had emerged. It was adorned with some slogans about justice, but he wasn't in the mood to read. He looked down at the line of taxis and spotted one with a round, harmless-looking young fellow in the back seat. It was good to know that Dynamo Dink, his buddy, was waiting for him.

Dynamo, grinning like a well-fed pet hippo, opened the door for him and ordered the taxi driver to cruise down the avenue. "Just as well take the morning off, Joe. It's half shot already, and you look like you are too. Whassa matter? Kinda rugged?"

Joe mopped his face and rubbed his jaw. "We'll take the whole day off." He loosened his collar. He was perspiring like a Turkish bath. How his pal Dynamo Dink could wear a topcoat on a summer day was more than he could fathom—but that was Dynamo. He wouldn't be Dynamo without that battered old gabardine with its many inside pockets, stuffed with everything imaginable; it made him look like an overstuffed tent on feet. Just now he drew a bottle of grape pop, mysteriously chilled, from one of his inner compartments. He opened it and handed it to Joe.

"You look like you could use a sip of your favorite brew . . . . Don't mention it . . . . So it was rough, huh?"

"Like a washboard. They drubbed me on both sides."

"What's their angle?"

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Joe let the purple juice gurgle down his throat, and the taxi driver glanced back enviously. Joe said, "They're trying to get something on Ruppert."

Dynamo's grin gave way to a dill-pickle look and he groaned.

"I know you've got no use for Ruppert," Joe said. "Lots of folks don't understand Ruppert. But he's my brother, and I'm not going to see them hang a murder on him when some Venus Killer is the guilty party. Ruppert never had anything against Senator Droondair."

"Oh, that!" Dynamo pretended to flick a bit of dust from his coat. "They should know they'd never get you to say anything against Ruppert. Though what he's ever done for you or Lanny is more than I can figure."

"We've had our differences," Joe admitted, "but after all, he is my brother. I can't understand all his fool notions, travelling out to rub elbows with those Venus devils. But Lanny and I have learned to take him as he is." Joe changed the subject abruptly. "Where are we driving, and why?"

"Just giving you a chance to cool off. You're sweating like a bowl of cannibal soup."

"Might as well drive back to our apartment. There might be some mail —which reminds me—" Joe started to reach for something he remembered putting in his inside coat pocket.

"It reminds me, too," said Dynamo. "Who's pulling the gags with the Venus knives?"

"Huh?" Joe saw that Dynamo was fishing into the depths of that big mystery-packed coat again.

"I just came from our apartment before I picked you up. I figured to bring you your mail, if any—which there wasn't. But I saw this." He brought forth a shining ten-inch knife with a red steel blade and a white handle.

Joe glared. "Not another one of those!"

Dynamo's grin faded. "So it ain't just a gag you're pulling on Lanny?"

"Gag, he says!" Joe felt himself grow pale. "Where did you find it?"

"On Lanny's desk there in the living room. Sticking up like a lightning rod. It didn't blend in right with the furniture, so I picked it up."

"Well, I'll be!" Joe placed the fingertips of both hands on his forehead and brushed them slowly down over his cheeks. Then he locked his hands together behind his head and fairly passed out into the realm of his own thoughts.

The taxi driver glanced back. Dynamo said, "Keep driving."

PRESENTLY Joe growled, "Dynamo, I'm in the mood for a fight."

"You don't have to tell me. I know the symptoms."

"I'm not talking about a schoolboy fight with the lads on the freight crew. I mean a real fight."

"Okay, okay. Shall we mop up on the Venus Killers, you and me?" Dynamo lifted a sarcastic eyebrow.

"It's about time, when they start sneaking in your homes, leaving a knife one day and slitting your throat the next." Joe took the knife, weighed it in his hand, and passed it back to Dynamo. "I'd sure hate to think anyone is gunning for Lanny. Ruppert and I raised him."

"Least of all would you suspect Ruppert, of course." Dynamo buried the knife somewhere within his coat. His last remark could have been left unsaid as far as Joe was concerned. They rode along in strained silence until Dynamo changed the key. "I agree with you, Joe, those Killers are seeping in, one way and another. I'm getting darned suspicious of the trade we carry on with them."

"How do you mean?"

"The steel they're shipping to my

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boss, Old Man Zuber, has got the *creeps*! I've been meaning to tell you. Why don't we drive out that way as long as we're killing the day?" Dynamo called an order to the taxi driver and they spun off the avenue and out along the wide highway toward the Zuber Oceanside Industries.

The driver took advantage of a red light and bought a noon paper, promptly losing himself in the headlines. The light changed, and Dynamo said, "Push 'er along, friend. You'll have plenty of time to do your reading later."

THEY DROVE as far around the grounds as a side road would take them. They told the driver to wait there; they would be back in half an hour. They struck out and walked along the fence toward the cliff above the deep Atlantic. The sun blazed down. Joe removed his coat, but not Dynamo.

Hiking along past the no-trespassing signs, Joe got a close-up view of the great beams of metal which the Zuber plant was shipping in from Venus. Slices of green and red metals, two and three hundred feet long, lay in rows, gleaming in the noon sun.

"The irony of it," Joe said. "What a trick of fate." He was thinking of the penal colony which the earth governments had once established on the Storm Continent of Venus. In that waste land the convicts had discovered unlimited quantities of the finest metals known to man.

"They've got all they want up there," Dynamo said, "and the devil of it is, they know how to use it. Even the scrap that they toss off to Old Man Zuber has got a lot of tricks in it."

"I'm still in the dark."

"That's what I brought you out to see," Dynamo said, leading the way along the fence. "Keep an eye open. Some of these big pieces we've shipped in recently don't stay put. I've been on guard nights and I swear I've seen them move along like big iron snails. Watch close down this way, and you'll—" Then in a quick warning whisper, "Drop! Here comes someone. We shouldn't be seen here."

The fence around the Zuber acres extended down a slope where a quarter of a mile of cliff had worn away. Two men were approaching along a path within the fence, slowing their pace as they plodded up the grade. Back of the rocks and bushes on the seaward side of the fence Joe and Dynamo hid themselves and waited. Dynamo whispered, "Of all the devils! If it ain't the big boss himself!"

"Zuber?"

"Yeah, the fat one in the white suit. The scrawny one they call Mouse. He's a big executive in the boss's office. Quiet little guy, but nobody crosses him. They say he's a brain."

"Listen!" Joe whispered.

The talking became audible. Zuber was puffing and perspiring, but it was plain from his big, gleaming blue eyes that he was as happy as any miser over his store of metal wealth.

"Yes, I quite agree with what you say," Mouse spoke in a tin-like voice. "But let me ask you, Zuber, have you noticed anything peculiar about these bars we've been getting lately?"

"Peculiar?"

"Very peculiar," the thin voice said.

"It's all scrap, Moberly. We're buying it all at scrap prices—with the aid of government subsidies, thanks to Maddergall. Rich deal, Moberly. What more could we ask?"

"Some of this metal is *alive*, Zuber. Believe me."

"Alive? What are you saying?"

"It's got live stuff in it. Anyway it moves."

"Concealed motors, perhaps? Those Venus boys are much farther along

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than anyone would guess. All right, we'll bust the stuff apart when the time comes, and pull out any internal power units they've left in. The main thing is to get more of it—more and more and *more!*"

"That's one of your three major plans, I understand," said Mouse Moberly, helping the big man up over a difficult step. They paused within ten feet of Joe and Dynamo's hiding place.

"And the other two are, keep the Venus Killers eating out of our hands, and promise them a chance to come back under *our* arrangement."

"Of course. *Our*—that is, *your*—for you'll be the one great man when that day comes."

"Not necessarily," Zuber said, giving his little companion a modest smile. "There'll be greatness enough for all of us. You'll be near the top. Maddergall, too. He's moving things in the right direction as fast as possible. Right in the groove, Maddergall is, the same as you and me. The main thing is, the plan has got to be so attractive for the Killers that they'll fall in, in good order."

"You mean, *after*—"

"*After* they've had their revenge. We can't deny them that. That's what they live for."

The smaller man gazed out at the ocean as if seeing visions. "Yes, Zuber, the bigness of it almost bowls me over. And yet—"

"It's not impossible. We're getting the substance of the whole revolution right here—here in this vast store of Venus metals, and that's why I say to you—"

Zuber broke off sharply. He gave such a quick movement of his arms that Joe wondered if he had suddenly discovered he was being spied upon. But no, he was looking the other way. With a trembling hand he pointed.

"Yes, I saw it," Mouse Moberly said in a low, excited voice. "It moved, didn't it? That's what I was telling you. Look!"

JOE STRETCHED his neck to see a twenty-five foot jointed beam of greenish-silver metal slipping gradually down the long embankment. A small cloud of dust rose around it, and a low dragging noise sounded. It moved down toward a square-shaped piece of similar metal to which other long beams were joined.

Clunk! The end of the sliding beam struck the wider piece with a concussion that made the ground tremble. The piece appeared to lock together, like a giant finger joining onto a hand. Dynamo must have thought of such a similarity, for he whispered to Joe, "Looks to me like a big hand with three fingers and a thumb."

"It fastened on, didn't it?"

"Just like train cars coupling together. It sure as heck belongs there." Then they ducked back and held their silence, for they could hear Zuber and Mouse Moberly talking it over.

"Just a coincidence, you think?" Mouse asked in a thin voice that expressed disbelief.

"Looks to me like the earth slipped a little with the weight," Zuber muttered. "Strange, though, the way it happened to fit up to that big hunk of a hand. A hand, that's what it looks like. Do you see it, Moberly? Those pieces must have belonged together. A part of a big statue, I'd say." He gave a dry laugh and slapped the little man on the back. "Don't lose any sleep over it, boy. Just a coincidence. However, you might get a crew out here sometime in the next week or two and see if there are any power units inside those pieces."

They moved on along the ridge out of hearing of Joe and Dynamo.

"Now you've seen," Dynamo whispered.

"Seen and *heard*," said Joe.

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"You heard what he said about Maddergall and the plot?"

"Did I? Dynamo, they're scheming to bust the whole interplanetary system wide open." Joe was staring with such intensity that he could hardly move until Dynamo tugged at his arm. He was fairly frozen. "Dynamo, we've heard it, both of us, and that means we've got it right on our shoulders."

"We better report to someone."

"To the right persons, nobody else. As quick as we can. What we know is as big as a million atom bombs. If we tell it to the wrong party, it's just plain good-night, world."

"Who'll we tell it to?"

"Only someone we can trust, for sure."

"Someone like your brother? Lanny, I mean. Not Ruppert."

They hurried along and got into the waiting taxi. "We'll tell Lanny, and the three of us can talk it over. Lanny's due in at noon today from his Mars run. He should be at the space port now."

The taxi spun off toward the highway. Joe, in his excitement, might have been talking louder than necessary, for Dynamo's big elbow gave him a meaningful nudge. The driver glanced around and said, "You got a brother named Lanny?"

"Just keep driving," Joe said. In a lower voice he went on to Dynamo, "Maybe we can get an appointment with Commander Doyle. He's more alert to sky dangers than any other official. He'll listen to us."

The driver glanced around again. "You say you want to go to the space port?"

"That's what we said."

"Your brother happen to be named Lanny Kane?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"You ain't gonna find him at the space port," the driver said.

"How do you know?"

"They got his picture here in the noon paper. He got killed this morning. He was bringin' in a ship. It was two hours out when it blew up. Someone named Lanny Kane was the pilot. I reckon they never knew what hit 'em. So that was your brother?" The driver passed the paper back to them.

Joe stared at it and answered numbly, "That was Lanny, my favorite brother."

CHAPTER III

YOU LIKED to see Commander Doyle's face on the television screen. He was a tall, raw-boned man with a high forehead and very direct eyes, very honest, looking right at you as he talked.

"The earth must be better prepared .... Enemies from another planet have increased their sniping attacks .... We must be ready for trouble . . . ."

All around the earth people were listening, on every continent and on the high seas. Out beyond the surface of the earth, too, there were television audiences. Sky stations for interplanetary travelers caught such messages and relayed them. Nearer the earth, fashionable entertainment clubs, hung in space, held up their own programs while the patrons gathered around huge television screens. Little Penny Maddergall, age six, drew closer to her mother as they watched and listened.

"Will we get shot on the way back to the earth, Mamma?" she asked plaintively.

"No, dear, no. You mustn't worry. Listen to what he's saying," her mother whispered. The commander continued:

"...Every citizen must be ready to do his part. Women and children who live in surface homes should arrange to move in with relatives or friends in underground homes. This is urgent. Do not put it off...."

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"Mamma, does that mean they won't kill us if we move underground?"

Claire Maddergall slipped an arm around her child. "You mustn't worry, dear. Daddy and Mamma will look out for you."

"But what about all the other little children?"

"S-s-sh! I'll talk with you later, Penny. Listen to what he's saying."

Little Penny looked around to see her father, Paul Maddergall, coming through the crowd. There were more than three hundred people gathered around the screen at one end of the enclosed deck. This was the "Lazy Meteor," a well known "sky-hung" recreation club, where many government and military personages spent their free time. It was located within two and a half hours of the earth's surface.

Paul Maddergall's face showed a worry as he rejoined his little family. The day's events had weighed heavily. Worst of all, every television listener around him was scared stiff over another space-ship disaster. The fools looked to him to be able to stop such catastrophes. Little did they know!

Glancing at Claire, her dark eyes shining and her face radiant under the colored lights, he told himself that she was a very glamorous woman. The thought struck him afresh because of something that had occurred earlier in the day—that round he had had with Joe Kane. Only it wasn't Joe he was thinking of; it was Ruppert. Only a few years ago Ruppert Kane had been in love with Claire—maybe still was, who knew? Maddergall smiled to himself. He had been clever enough to win her away from Ruppert Kane, and that was all that mattered.

A sudden dread filled Maddergall as the television programs switched and the day's news came on.

"Look, Daddy, that's you," Penny whispered proudly.

It was a scene from the morning's investigations, and Paul Maddergall stood stiffly as he watched himself and heard his own crisp voice firing the questions.

"Nice going, Paul," someone in the crowd said to him. Other friends glanced about and nodded, as if pleased to find themselves in the presence of so important a man.

But Maddergall's wife only watched in silence.

"Don't take it too seriously, dear," Maddergall whispered to her. "I had to prod him a bit."

"Paul, you're accusing his brother Ruppert of being one of the Venus Killers."

"Nothing of the kind, dear."

"That's going too far, Paul. You know Ruppert Kane wouldn't—" Claire Maddergall broke off, biting her lip.

"Hmm. So you're still carrying the torch for that no-good bum! I had often wondered. Now I know." Maddergall froze into stony silence, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She pretended not to hear him, keeping her eyes glued on the television screen. The scene moved abruptly, to Maddergall's relief, without showing him grab the knife from the table. But the commentator spoke of a bit of roughhouse, in which the fresh young witness learned a thing or two.

"Look, they're fighting," Penny cried. "Daddy, did he try to hurt you?"

On the screen Joe Kane could be seen rising from his chair, holding out his open hands, trying to say something, and the sergeant-at-arms was shown slugging him. Next he was shown picking himself up off the floor.

"But Daddy, why did the man hit him?"

Penny's questions were abruptly hushed by both her parents. A few

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jovial spirits from the crowd turned to joke with Paul Maddergall over the brisk skirmish. "You meet all kinds of characters in your business, eh, Maddergall? Better carry a gun. Or do you?" But Claire Maddergall only asked to be excused, and she and little Penny wandered away to another part of the deck....

JOE KANE and Dynamo Dink sat in their underground apartment in deep gloom. Dynamo watched the television news through the scene of Joe's being mauled, and muttered, "So that's how you got your swollen face." Joe said nothing. The news went on, giving flashes from the memorial service he and Dynamo had attended late in the afternoon for Lanny Kane and the others who had been lost in the spaceship explosion.

"They're getting it down to routine," Dynamo said. "Disaster in the morning, service in the afternoon, newscast at night; maybe the same thing again tomorrow."

"He was a swell kid," Joe said quietly. "We're going to miss him around here.... Who do you suppose planted that knife? They must have known what was coming."

"Sure. Sure they knew." Dynamo glanced at his watch. "Time for me to get over to the plant. I've got a night of work to do."

"Thanks for sticking with me all day, Dynamo." Joe drew a deep breath. "Maybe I'll ride over with you."

"Come along. The air will do you good."

"Yeah. Besides, I remember something I left over that way this morning. I put my coat down when we were eavesdropping on Zuber."

"You'll have a heck of a time finding it out there in the dark. Better steer clear of the guards."

"I'm in the mood to prowl," Joe said in an aggressive voice.

"Well, don't take any chances. After all, what's a coat?"

"It had a letter in it."

"Something important?"

"I never got to open it. Things have been happening so fast." Joe led the way out the door.

"Did you ever get in touch with Commander Doyle?"

"They tried three times and he was always busy. They think I can see him tomorrow, but maybe I'll try again later tonight. This business of losing Lanny has sort of knocked the props out from under me. Before that happened I was ready to go find Paul Maddergall and whip him. If I thought he had anything to do with Lanny's raw deal—"

"Sure he has. It's all one big net." Dynamo hailed a taxi and they rode off down the lighted streets toward the darkness beyond the city. Dynamo shuffled among his overloaded pockets. "Anything you need for your prowl? Flashlight? Rope? I've got a boy scout compass if you think you'll get lost. Care for a pair of water wings? The ocean's deep off that cliff."

"Thanks anyway," and Joe managed to chuckle a good night as he dropped off.

THE NIGHT air was exhilarating. Troubles were heavy, but Joe was beginning to see his own clear purpose through it all. He talked to himself with quiet determination as he trudged along the fence where he and Dynamo had walked earlier in the day. It was one thing to be hounded by mysterious enemies that left death knives on tables and blasted space ships without warning. It was quite another to see these treacheries coming into focus in the motives of Paul Maddergall and Old Man Zuber. There was some comfort in knowing your own deadliest

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hates were aimed in the right direction.

Lights played along the fence that surrounded the Zuber yards. Joe gave them a wide berth until the nearness of the coast drew him in closer.

A guard bobbed up from somewhere and shouted, "Hey, who's there? That you, Tom?"

Joe stopped in the shadows and waited. The guard called again, and someone answered from a point farther up the line. The guard was apparently satisfied. Joe could hear the two of them shuffling along through the metal-strewn paths until they met. They fell into a discussion about the moving metals, and Joe slipped along unnoticed.

He was nearing the point where he had left his coat when he heard the low grind of creeping beams.

Lights played across eastern extremity of the yard and down toward the waters of the Atlantic. The guards were watching from various points, obviously baffled.

"There goes another one," a voice shouted from off across the seaward slope.

"Darned if I know what we can do to stop them," someone yelled back. "We've tried everything."

"If this keeps up the Old Man's goin' to notice."

"They've got a lively gravity pull, that's all. They won't float off too far. Let the Old Man dredge the sea. What the hell."

"He'll be blazin' mad when he sees how his fence is tore out, and that's when we'll get it in the neck. He's losing hundreds of dollars on every darn beam that crawls off. We'd better report."

Joe moved on more boldly. The guards were too busy watching the action of the big pieces of metal to be aware of trespassers. He reached the spot where he and Dynamo had hidden to eavesdrop. Over the bank, out of the level of the lights, he rummaged around among the warm rocks. Here was the coat, all right, lying right where he had left it.

A shower of dust and sand fell over him as he straightened up, coat in hand. A huge cylindrical beam was slipping out over the bank right above his head.

He jumped back and stumbled. The black mass was riding out like a huge oil tank over an embankment. For a moment he thought it was falling on him. Impulsively he reached up to protect himself, at the same time doing his best to regain his feet.

"There goes another big one," he heard someone shout. "That's one of those two-hundred-footers. Look at 'er crawl."

WITH A GRIND of earth and rocks, the big cylindrical piece moved out like a streamline train shooting off the end of the track. Joe's hand felt the round underbelly of the beam as it skimmed over him. His fingers rubbed against a square metal button that made him think of an electric buzzer. It must have been a key or a lever. He heard something fly open.

Whoosh!

The suction pulled at him. He came off his feet. His shoulder struck the curved edge of what must have been a trap door. The reflected light barely outlined the opening, and that bit of light was all that saved him. The suction pulled at his hair and clothing, but he kicked against the visible edge of the trap door and fell away.

He fell twelve or fifteen feet onto the rocky bank, for by this time the outward movement of the huge metal beam had carried him away from his original footing. As it kept moving it would soon teeter-totter over the bank's edge and then angle down to-

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ward the ocean. He rolled to his feet, struck for a stretch of lighted surface, and raced for safety out across the sand.

"Hey, look down there!" one of the guards shouted. "Someone fell out of that big pipe. I saw someone running."

"You're seeing things," someone retorted. "The rocks are rollin'."

"Yeah? Do rocks have legs? Don't tell me. Those darn things are inhabited. That's why they crawl. Someone's inside, runnin' the powerhouse."

Another voice in the darkness declared that the Old Man had better come around and get a load of what was happening.

"He's already seen," a guard replied. "He came around this afternoon, him and Mouse Moberly. Now he's got a bad headache and don't want to hear no more about it."

Joe knew he was lucky to get out of range without being pursued, for someone had certainly glimpsed him chasing off into the blackness. He was luckier still to have escaped the draughty pull of the hollow steel beam. It had almost pulled his clothing off of him before he kicked away. It had got his coat.

"Good-bye, letter," he muttered. "I'll never know what it was."

Now with a rip and an earth-shuddering thump, the big beam tilted over the bank like an overweighted teeter-totter, and crushed down over rocks and sand and the remains of the fence. As rigid as a rocket, it slid forward into the sea. The lights of the guard towers followed it, and Joe saw the long splash and heard the roar as it was swallowed up.

High on another bank he lay, applying salve and bandages to his bleeding legs distractedly. All night long the strange movements of metals continued seaward—pieces of all conceivable shapes. He could only lie and wonder what it was all about. He waited and watched, as if in a nightmare. His sore legs rebelled against the trudge back to the bus line; and as long as the big shadowy movements continued from across the slope he was too fascinated to move.

At the first gray of dawn he looked out over the black Atlantic and saw a sight which no man on earth had ever seen before.

CHAPTER IV

IT CAME up out of the sea from somewhere about two miles east of the shore. At first it was only a dot of light away out there on the black waters. Joe watched it, wondering what ship it could be, carrying such a powerful searchlight.

The point of light was restless. It turned this way and that, not with the regularity of a beacon, but with a nervous movement. It moved like the eyes of a lost child trying to get his bearings.

Then it began to rise. Out of the dark waters against the gray of the eastern sky it moved upward like a gigantic searchlight on a tower, being pushed up from its submerged base. The tower which supported it widened into a gigantic head. The light of early dawn gleamed on its silvery surface.

In every way it was like a head, Joe thought. A head surmounted by a massive light that shot straight, hard beams out across the black Atlantic. It was like a head in the way it moved. It moved not as a boat glides but as a man walks. As it rose higher, the great dark bulk of its wide shoulders came into view—shoulders with arms that hung down in the water. It was walking shoreward. If it had feet they must be treading the ocean floor; for with its shoreward approach it grew taller and taller. Out of the depths came its vast body, a gigantic chest

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that tapered down into narrower hips; chest and pelvis and legs of gleaming steel. The long arms swung with the easy gait of its walking, graceful steel fingers silhouetted cleanly against the morning sky.

The sun was rising, and Joe thought the iron monster's headlight must have dimmed a little—until the beam chanced to turn directly on that part of the shore where he lay watching. The brilliance with which every detail of the shoreline was suddenly lighted made Joe feel naked.

The light turned away slowly and Joe's eyes swam. For minutes he had been watching as if hypnotized. Perhaps more than an hour had passed—yes, more than that, he knew, for the morning had turned from darkness to full daylight. And during it all he had lain helpless, as if he had been struck down by a physical blow.

The urgency to get up and run pried at him in vain. He seemed to be experiencing a nightmare that he couldn't break out of. Were other people seeing what he saw? All along the shore for miles in both directions the towering iron monster must be visible.

Where was the great creature going? What did it mean to do? How close to the shore would it come, trudging step by step into the shallower waters? Across the low waves Joe could see the stalking movements of its shadow. The shadow advanced to the piers down the shore and slowly edged over a row of industries around the point of land. People in those far-off apartment buildings, Joe thought, must be awakening with cries of terror. Nearer at hand were a few fishermen's shanties, from which the fishermen had already pushed out to sea. Were their families still sleeping peacefully? What a shock they would have when they looked out at the morning sky!

"It must be hundreds of feet tall," Joe guessed, trying to gauge by a distant lighthouse.

SUDDENLY he was running. He ran, hardly knowing why. It was a dizzy impulse to tell everybody, to shout to the houses up and down the coast, to cry an alarm. But how far would he get on his lame limping legs? He scrambled over the rocks along the sea wall and jogged into an open lane. From some of the huts he could hear the radios blaring. Of course, the coastguardsmen were already shouting it to the world. How silly of him to think that he had anything to tell.

Yet he knew something about it that they didn't know. Again he stood, peering into the distant east. "Born under the sea," he said aloud. Tall and black and terrible against the white sky, it walked like a man. "Born under the sea," he repeated.

"Born under the sea," the voice of a girl spoke quietly.

That was the first he had realized anyone was near him. But people were coming out of their houses now, pointing and shouting. And so Joe was hardly surprised to discover that someone was standing nearby.

"I watched the metal parts move down into the ocean," Joe said, hardly looking at her. He pointed. "See those long arms? Those were big beams of steel lying on the ground up at Zuber's."

"Who put them together?" the girl asked.

"They put themselves together."

"But what is it? What's it for?"

"Look at it move. It's a giant of power. It's hundreds of feet tall. See how small that lighthouse is?"

"What's it for? I don't understand." The girl repeated her plaintive question several times. Joe was so intent upon watching that he hardly heard her. Then he felt her tugging at his sleeve, and knew she was asking the

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question in fright. "What's it going to do? I'm afraid."

He turned to look at her. She was a girl of eighteen or nineteen. Fear shone in her dark liquid eyes. She had evidently hurried out of the house in her dressing gown. Her dark hair hung loosely over her shoulders. With one hand she held the collars of her gown at her throat. She was barefoot.

"Look, the boats are going out to it," she said. "It must be something the government has built—though why would they build such a monster?"

Joe watched the coast guard cutters ploughing out from shore. He could imagine the men on board looking up at the big tower of steel hovering over them.

"Say, they're plenty nervy," he muttered. "They're taking an awful chance. Suppose that thing would stumble and fall."

"Is it alive?"

"I wish I could answer all your questions. It's just a great big mechanism, I can tell you that. And it was born at sea, because I watched it go in, piece by piece, and I saw it come out walking upright. And I can guess a couple of other guesses. It's just the first one. There'll be more."

"Oh!"

"I'm not trying to scare you. I just happen to know that more metal has crept into the ocean than we see in that one monster. There could be another, any hour of any day."

"It looks so—so hideous. Do you think it could possibly be harmless?"

The girl was standing so close beside him he was tempted to slip his arm around her. She gave a glad little cry. "Oh, look. It's giving them a signal."

THE GREAT dark hand of the steel monster was slowly rising as the nearest boat moved across its path. Joe held his breath hopefully. The giant arm raised—yes, it was surely a signal of friendship. The open hand was being lifted—

Then suddenly the great steel fist clenched and the arm came down like a hammer. The fist struck the boat squarely.

"What happened?" the girl cried. "Something went wrong. It hit the boat. Where is it? Where's the boat?"

"The boat's gone," Joe said coldly.

"What a dreadful accident. Oh, that's terrible. It just struck down, like a club—"

"It was no accident," Joe said quietly. The breath went out of him. "Look! Look!"

The massive man of steel bent toward two other boats that had followed the first. The huge searchlight on its head turned down upon one of them. Now both boats were turning about, powering for a quick getaway. But the big iron hand came down on the end of one of them.

It sliced down sidewise like an ax. The glancing blow made the boat leap out of the water. Quick as a lightning flash the other big mechanical hand swung and caught it in midair. It might have been a celluloid toy. The big steel fingers lifted it to a level with the massive head, and the blaze of the searchlight turned full on it. Then the steel fingers squeezed with a death grip. In a moment the faint echoes of wood and metal crunching came across the waters to Joe's ears.

The hand opened. The wreckage fell from it, struck the water, and sank. The big searchlight turned to look for the third boat, and the wide waves went out from the Iron Man's towering form as it continued to plod along through the ocean.

The girl was crying. Her head was against Joe's shoulder. What would happen, she was asking through her sobs. If more of these monsters were on their way, what would happen? Would everything be destroyed?

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"Listen, friend," Joe said quietly, holding her tight in his arms. "I can't tell you what's going to happen. Nobody can. Nobody knows. But I can give you some good advice."

She looked up at him and drew away a little. "I'm sorry, acting like this."

"You don't need to apologize. After what we've just seen, we're both scared out of our senses and we'd just as well admit it. As soon as the radios get this out to the people, the whole country's going to be in a panic.... I hope you didn't have a father or a brother out on one of those boats."

She shook her head. "I only have a father. He used to be a fisherman." She pointed to the nearest house. "He's in there—bedfast."

"That's bad." He regarded her with interest. "That must be a big job for you."

"We're getting along so far. I work. It's time I was at the restaurant now. I work over on the highway. But I can't go this morning, and leave him—"

"Don't you worry about any restaurant job. The way that thing's moving, they'll never open the doors this morning. Look, people are already getting out."

DOWN THE shore line people, screeching like crazed birds, were loading into their cars and tearing out. A vision of mad traffic jams and stampeding mobs came to Joe's mind.

"You were going to advise—"

"You'd better not lose any time," Joe said crisply. "Can you get your father onto a bus? You don't have a car, do you?"

"A pick-up that Dad used to run. I drive it a little. But where would I go?"

"Inland, anywhere. Anywhere away from the coast and the city. That monster was born in water, and he might stick to the ocean or the streams. Anyway you'll be in less danger inland. Come on, I'll help you get started."

He thought she was going to faint, she looked so pale, passing her hand over her forehead. Then she gave him a smile. "I'm sorry to be such a weakling. But I feel so—so helpless. I don't know where we can go. And we haven't any money. Less than a dollar. Today would be pay day. If I could go to the restaurant—"

"No time for that." Joe jerked out his billfold. "Here, I can spare part of this. Here's twenty-three dollars." He forced it into her hands. "Now, no time to waste. Let's get that car of yours into action."

"I've never taken money from a stranger," she said between breaths as they ran toward the house. "But I seem to know you.... I knew your voice when I heard you say...born under the sea.... I guess I've heard you on television.... Was it yesterday morning?"

Joe took the car keys and ran around to the dilapidated little truck in the back yard. It sputtered twice, then roared into life. He swung around to the front step. A flurry of talk, groans from the old man, a scurrying of steps, a bouncing of two battered old suitcases, and within minutes they were locking the door and helping the weak, sick old man down to the car.

"I'll drive you to the other side of the city," Joe said.

"Father," the girl said, as they settled together in the single seat, "this is Joe Kane, the boy you liked so well on the television program yesterday morning...and my name is Mary."

"We have relatives in the mountains," the old man spoke painfully. "We'll go there."

A wide shadow moved over them like a fast-moving cloud approaching somewhere from the east. Joe steered the car through the gate and down the lane. As soon as he got onto the high-

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way his foot went down to the floorboard.

CHAPTER V

COMING back into the city after escorting Mary and her father safely to the highway beyond, Joe wondered if he was behaving like a man returning to a burning building. All the way back, on foot, by bus, and by taxi, he headed into swarms of outbound traffic. It was like a wartime evacuation. Perhaps it was the beginning of war.

He was now many miles west of the coast where the Iron Man was marching. Radios blared the latest news from all directions. From overhead scouting planes with loudspeakers called down at the stampeding crowds to take their time.

"Don't rush.... Don't rush.... The danger is many miles away.... Keep in order....Obey all traffic signals....The danger is not near this area...."

Well out of the so-called danger area Joe entered one of the city's great public buildings and took an elevator down to the underground offices.

"I've got to see Commander Doyle."

"I'm afraid not, sir." The secretary was polite but firm. "The commander is not receiving unofficial visitors."

"I had an appointment. I called yesterday. They said I might see him today."

"I'm sorry, sir. All appointments are off."

"But this is urgent. This is—"

"Talk with the man in the blue uniform," the secretary said, and gave Joe a wave of dismissal.

The man in the blue uniform had been placed to handle just such eager callers as Joe.

"Sorry, buddy, it can't be done."

"I've got to see him. It's about the emergency."

"Yeah? Did you come in off the streets? Did you hear those sirens out there? That's all about the emergency. Planes going over? Tanks moving down to the shore? That's what they're all about, buddy—the emergency. Now I know the commander would be tickled pink to have a nice chummy visit with you, but you're just one little squeak in a great big roar. So—"

"Listen, sir," Joe tried hard to be polite while he was burning up, "I happen to have information—*inside* information. If I can see Commander Doyle for just five minutes—"

For a moment Joe thought the big man in blue was weakening as he turned to another official. "Still keeping count, George? Here's another man that swears he's got inside information."

"Thirty-seven," said the other official with a wink. "By noon we'll have a hundred. Why didn't these inside-information crackbrains come in yesterday? Why wait till the world's getting smashed to hell?"

Joe's voice went savage. "Listen, I did try yesterday. They told me today. You'll find it on the books. The name is Joe Kane."

The officer sneered. "Joe Kane, Joe Doakes, Joe Blowhard—"

"It's Joe Kane!" Joe was fairly on the desk that blocked his way. The officer gave him a push back on his heels.

"It's all the same to me, buddy. If I let you inside that door, you'd come right out on your ear. I'm protecting you. I'm telling you nice like a mother."

Then the man in blue stopped talking and fastened his eyes on something across the room. Joe looked. Everyone in the room looked. The fifteen-foot television screen brought in the outside world like a picture window. The room grew quiet as the crowd watched. Joe saw at a glance what was happening. The big iron monster was moving

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slowly up into the bay.

"He's got a mania for boats," someone muttered.

"He put the kayo on a big ocean liner just outside the harbor," another commented. "Pounded it like a trip hammer till it sank."

"I'm getting out of here. He could uproot this whole city if he once got started."

SOME OF the spectators made for the door; others preferred the underground offices to the peril of going up on the surface. Every minute or so the voices of the newscasters would call out the Iron Man's position. Persons who were not in the area of immediate danger were urged to stay where they were. As yet the streets of the city were safe. But it was feared that a panic flight might attract the monster's attention. "Stay out of the traffic.... Stay where you are.... Do not leave your building unless your area is ordered to evacuate...."

Under the heavy voice of the announcer were the low excited hisses of those watching the screen. Another boat!

"He's after that tugboat. There it goes. He's got it."

The luckless tugboat failed to make the shore. The Iron Man reached for it. The great steel fingers of death closed over it. Out of the cacophony you heard the sound of the crush. The splintered mass splashed into the water. The telescopic lens brought a close-up of the water. There might be survivors swimming for shore. The television camera spotted one. He was dragging an arm, bloody, twisted. A white patch across his head showed were his skull had been sliced. He was crying with pain, yet swimming like mad. Then the big steel fingertip smashed down across his body.

"Where'd he go?"

"Down."

"He looked like someone I knew once."

"It could have been any of us."

The television camera played over the empty waters for a moment and then began to move upward. The close-up rose slowly, taking in the full height of the towering steel form. The plates of metal which formed the head were fitted with the same monotonous regularity as those of the expansive chest. The face gave no expression.

"It's a machine. That's all you can make of it."

"That face has the look of the very devil, if you ask me."

"It hasn't any look at all. It's just a machine."

"The ferry boat!" someone gasped. "That's the boat my girl friend always comes over on."

"It's turning back.... It's trying to, anyway. Or is it drifting?"

"Why did they ever let it leave the shore? They should have known better."

"Look, he's going after it. Just two long steps and he's right over it. He's going to get it, all right."

"There's no one on it—it's empty. It must be a trick."

The screen brought the scene up close. The steel giant's hands came down upon the boat and lifted it out of the water. They started to tear it like a pack of cards. There was a great flash of fire.

"I told you it was a trick!" someone cried. "They had the darn thing loaded with explosives. It's blown up."

THE CLOUD of smoke cleared, and the big metal hand could be seen brushing off the splinters of exploded wreckage. Burning debris hissed into the water. The big creature of Venus metal stalked on slowly, apparently unscathed.

"Here comes a batch of planes!" was the next hopeful cry from the

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crowd around the screen.

Bomb-laden flying ships whipped into the picture at high speed. Bombs dropped, and the explosions rocked the earth and the sea. And when the smoke cleared, the Iron Man stood where he had stood before, unshaken.

"Here come four fast ones!"

"Yes, and he's got a weapon ready for them."

The planes cut across the picture like bullets. The Iron Man reached to his side. A weapon hung there. It fairly leaped into his hand. Its colored barrels gleamed in the sun. The hand rose to take aim.

"Smoke! That's the stuff. Blind him with smoke!"

The watchers around the screen went wild with sudden hope. Great clouds of black smoke boiled around the towering monster. The four planes had fired smoke bombs. Out of the mass the Iron Man's pistol flashed.

"He's shooting at himself. He can't see! He's aiming at himself!"

"He's aiming at the smoke around him."

The pistol fanned out a spray of blue light. The smoke rolled into it. It might have been a vacuum, the way the cloud rushed in. A moment later the air was crystal clear.

The four planes came screaming back. The pistol turned on them. Instead of a blue spray, it shot a pencil-thin ray of yellow. Zip. Zip. Two lines of yellow jumped from one of the pistol barrels. Two planes were struck with mathematical precision. They burst into flames. Zip. Plane number three caught the deadly ray and exploded. Zip. The ray went its length but fell short. Plane number four rode away on the wings of luck.

"What next?"

"More planes. I hear them. My heavens, this is suicide!"

While the whole room was engrossed, Joe quietly slipped through the unguarded door that led to Commander Doyle's office.

In the midst of a whirl of orders to his battery of secretaries, the tall steely-eyed uniformed commander turned to face Joe.

"Who are you and what do you want?" the commander snapped.

CHAPTER VI

JOE HANDED Commander Doyle a card. "I'm Joe Kane, sir. I have some important information. You need my help, sir."

The Commander stared at him dubiously. Joe's voice had quavered. He was afraid—not afraid of facing the commander, but afraid that some trifling error would cause him to fall down, now that the moment had come to tell his story. This chance would surely never come again. The commander waited.

"I know something about the plot, sir. Two of our own men are scheming to use Venus' help to overthrow..."

"Stop right where you are, young man. I've heard that tale every day for weeks. Everyone is accusing everyone else. Any man with an enemy wants to tell me privately that his enemy is linked with the Venus Killers."

"Yes, sir, but what I've overheard makes me very sure—"

"Two men, you say? Who are they?"

"Paul Maddergall and—"

"Maddergall, the investigator? Hold on, young man. Aren't you the same Joe Kane who had a round with Maddergall yesterday morning?"

"Yes sir, but—"

"I can see right through your grievance and it sounds just like dozens of others. Who's your other man?"

"Zuber. He and Maddergall are plotting together—"

"Who let you in here anyway?"

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Joe swallowed hard. "I—just came in. That is—"

"I'm sorry to be curt with you, young man, but I'm not the world court, you know. If you gather any evidence against your fellow citizens that will hold water, take it to the proper authorities—"

"But I knew I could trust you. Commander Doyle, listen to me. I *know* where that Iron Man came from. And Zuber knows. It's come from pieces of Venus steel he's shipped in. They've slipped into the sea and they've pulled together automatically, and somehow—"

Now all at once Doyle's fine face was alight with interest. He regarded Joe from head to foot as if taking his measure. He said, "Go on, Kane, I'm listening."

"We watched the pieces slide into the sea—my friend Dink and I. We heard Zuber and his assistant talking about it. They didn't know we were listening. That's when they talked about Maddergall being in with them—"

"No, get back to the Iron Man. What you've just said fits with stories I've had from several other sources. There's no doubt about the metals creeping away and locking together in a pre-planned fashion. But tell me this, Kane, do you have any evidence that Zuber knows how this Iron Man works?"

"No."

"Do you think he does know?"

Joe frowned. "No, he doesn't know. He was as surprised as anyone else to know the stuff contained some kind of internal power units."

"That's what I thought. In other words he doesn't know a thing that would help us defeat this monster with one quick stroke?"

"No."

"Then I would say he doesn't deserve to be linked with the Venus Killers. He may fall victim to this senseless destruction any hour the same as the rest of us."

Joe wanted to say that Zuber and Maddergall had simply let their own plan get out of hand—which didn't make them any less guilty of treason against the earth. But before he could say it, Commander Doyle carried him off in the other direction.

"The one desperate need of the moment, Joe Kane, is an understanding of the operation of that steel giant. It defies our bombs, and obviously it's paving the way for an attack from the Killers."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you any information regarding the secret of its operation?"

"No, sir."

"If you know of anyone bold enough to get that secret, I'll be glad to supply a ship and fuel or anything else needed."

"I'd be glad to try, sir," Joe said. "My friend Dink will probably help me."

"You realize, don't you, that any ship that flies within range of that steel brute gets sudden death?"

Joe nodded. "My brother Lanny got sudden death yesterday. That gives me plenty of reason to put all I've got into this fight."

The commander asked a secretary to make out a blank order for whatever Joe Kane might need. He offered Joe a handshake and good wishes. Then he touched a button and a moment later the man in the blue uniform appeared.

"This is Joe Kane," Commander Doyle said. "Any time he comes in asking to see me—"

"I bounce him out on his ear—yes-sir!" the eager officer said.

"You conduct him back to this office to see me," the commander said, "with due respect.... Good luck, Kane."

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CHAPTER VII

"THAT'S EIGHT times we've circled him," Dynamo Dink said as they banked their plane in a direction out of range of danger. "And I'll swear we don't know a thing we didn't know two hours ago. We know he kills if we get in range. We know he's standing in the middle of the bay threatening the cities all around. We know he's got eyes in the back of his head. We know he can take all the

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smoke screens we brew up, and melt them away with one blue puff from his pistol. What else do we know?"

"We're trying. We're working on it," Joe said gloomily. "We're not running away, are we? We're not quitting."

"In some ways he's like a man," Dynamo said. "He works awhile, then he gets fed up with it all and he rests awhile. He gets fed up with resting and he works awhile. His work happens to be killing."

Joe looked back through the summer clouds. The monster had advanced leisurely up the river a short distance, smashing any boats that caught his attention. He towered high above the lower clouds, well above the tops of the tallest buildings.

"If he's enough like a man, we ought to find a way of outwitting him."

"But then again he's not like a man," Dynamo said. "He doesn't eat and he doesn't drink. So far as you can tell, he doesn't have any heart or soul. His heart is all steel and his soul has gone to the devil."

"I've been thinking along those lines," Joe said. "There's more of downright cruelty in him than you ever saw in any man. You take a seasoned killer—he may put a blow torch to his enemy, but he wouldn't necessarily harm a child—not unless he was mad. But this monster never pulls a punch for anyone. You saw it yourself on television—that party of young kids along the shore. He reached over and caught them on the sidewalk and hammered them till there wasn't anything left but stains."

"Why?"

"That's what I'm asking. Why?" Joe groaned. "Heaven knows there's no human motive back of a thing like that. It doesn't make sense—not unless the Venus killers have wound him up,

somehow, and turned him loose to go on a terrorizing spree—"

"Just to soften us up for what's coming," Dynamo said. "I reckon that's it."

THEY CIRCLED back, watching him through the telescope. He was beginning to act up again, and this time he directed his blows at the buildings above the shore line. Standing knee deep in the water, he clung to his pistol with one hand. With the other he hammered at the tops of a row of buildings. He tore away a section of a huge steel bridge and used it as a club. Right down the line he went, striking one big building after another. Fires broke out in his wake.

"I don't see many people," Dynamo said. "Looks like they've left it all to him."

"They've had plenty of warning to go underground. But you know how warnings are. Some folks always think they can outsmart the authorities. He's probably mangling a few bodies every time he lowers that fist."

"Look out, Joe, we're getting pretty close."

The Iron Man heard them coming, that was plain. He straightened suddenly and fired his pistol. The line of yellow came straight toward them, widening into a blot that was blinding. Joe throttled for a swift climb.

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"We're gone," Dynamo groaned.

"Not if we're still here to tell about it," Joe said. They pulled away, knowing it had been a close call. They couldn't have been fast enough to dodge the ray, they knew that; it had just fallen short, that was all. Dynamo dug into his coat and brought out two bottles of grape pop, ready chilled.

"Have a cool drink," Dynamo said, "and then tell me this. How are you going to outwit a thing—man or machine—that's twice as quick as you are and a hellova lot more deadly?"

"It's like Commander Doyle said, There's got to be a key somewhere."

"You mean the key they wound the darn thing up with?"

Joe glanced to catch the ironic light in Dynamo's eye. They both saw the absurdity of trying to compare the Iron Man with some complex mechanical toy. There couldn't be anything "set" in such complicated fashion that it would invariably come through with all those quick human reactions.

"It's responding to a human being's will," Joe said. "And the folks that are running it are either inside it or close about. For all we know, the whole military staff of the Venus Killers may be camped right up there in its big iron head, looking out in all directions for a chance to make trouble."

Again they made a wide circle around, studying the Iron Man's head through the telescope. Joe believed that a fine photograph would show apertures on all sides for alert human eyes to look through.

That was the one theory he and Dynamo brought back with them when they descended to the landing field. They taxied to a stop and sat in the plane discussing it. Dynamo wasn't very well satisfied with the reasoning.

"Somehow, Joe, I just can't see them acting together that quick and that precise. Here. I'll show you why." Dynamo dug into his coat and came up with a little square box with a screen across the top. Inside were his three pet mice. "Look, what have I got here, Joe?"

"Three mice."

"I've got the Iron Man's head, like you describe it, with the whole darn military staff inside. They're all peeking out separate windows on the lookout for trouble. Right on their toes, you betcha. All of a sudden I blow off a firecracker, let's say. The blast is so close they all jump at once. So what happens? Do they stop and take a vote on what they're gonna do about it? Do they say: let Bill decide this time what we do? There's no time for that. There's no time to think, much less talk. There's just time to act, that quick. And you tell me how these three mice, surrounded by fifty thousand levers and push buttons, all happen to jump for pushbutton number twenty-two thousand five hundred and ninety-nine—or whatever the case may be? Tell me, Joe, how is that?"

Joe nodded slowly. "Those mice look hungry, Dynamo. We'd better stop at a store and get them some cheese."

Dynamo reached into his coat. "Just by merest chance, I happen to have some cheese."

Joe looked across to the fiery horizon where the tall dark iron figure stood towering above the burning buildings. The figure stood motionless with arms dropped casually at his sides.

"Now what's he up to?" Dynamo asked.

"It could be lunch time up there too, you know. Something tells me the whole Venus Killer staff is up there in that fellow's hollow dome, munching on cheese sandwiches."

"Cut it out, Joe. You're making fun of me. Just because these mice are gobbling cheese doesn't prove—"

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"The only way to prove what's inside that monster is to get inside and see for ourselves. Dynamo, have you got the nerve?"

"Lead the way," Dynamo said.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN in the blue uniform in Commander Doyle's reception room gave them a skeptical eye, but his tone was one of respect.

"Yes, gentlemen. Right this way, please," and he conducted them back to the commander's office.

The commander was having coffee, dictating to two stenographers, and keeping a nervous eye on the television screen all at the same time. He greeted Joe and Dynamo briskly and asked them to sit down.

"You almost got shot down up there, Kane. The yellow ray came within yards of you. The folks around the television were screaming for you to get out of range. We don't want any careless casualties. Did you accomplish anything at all?... Have you any new ideas?... We're stumped, are we? Even the big guns have failed to stagger that monster.

"Sir, we'd like to try to climb up inside him. A little well-placed destruction—"

"My theory exactly. A small handfull of explosives at some key spot—perhaps the base of the electric brain, or whatever the devil it is that makes him function. The fact is, Kane, we already have two suicide squads at work on the plans. They'll go to work if they can get an angle."

"Maybe we could join 'em," Dynamo suggested. "Or beat 'em to the punch."

"Didn't you work all night last night, Dink?" the commander asked sharply.

"Yes, sir, come to think of it."

"And you, Kane?"

"I spent the night watching."

"I strongly advise that you both get some rest. You look a bit exhausted. Go home and sleep. Call back at four in the morning. If the squads haven't found their way to kayo the monster by that time, you boys have the green light."

"Thank you, sir." They started off.

"Oh, Kane," the commander called, beckoning. "May I have a private word with you before you go?"

Dynamo gave a puzzled grin and bowed out. Joe came back to Doyle's desk. He took a chair and waited. The commander shuffled through some of the papers on his desk as if looking for a memo. He was a bit embarrassed over something he wanted to say, Joe thought.

"I hate to give anyone the job of climbing inside that Iron Man," he said casually.

"We've asked for it."

"It does sound like a suicide assignment, doesn't it?"

"It could be. There must be some Venus Killers somewhere inside the Iron Man—probably up in his head—"

"And now I remember what I wanted to ask you," Commander Doyle broke in as if he had lost the trail of Joe's speculations. "What can you tell me about your brother, Ruppert Kane?"

"Ruppert?" Joe's eyes widened. At a time like this why should they stop to discuss his brother Ruppert? "I don't follow you. Is Ruppert here? Have you seen him?"

"I've no intention of embarrassing you, Joe." The commander turned to one of the secretaries. "Where did you find that coffee, Miss Garnett? Get a cup for Mr. Kane, please.... There, Joe, don't let the question worry you. You see, the minute this trouble from Venus thickened, the earth governments began to send notes of protest to the Venus Storm Colony. Now noth-

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ing would suit those boys better than to try to pin the responsibility on their earth friends, shall we say. Is it your belief that your brother Ruppert was a friend of the Venus Killers?"

"Not exactly a friend," Joe said. "He was more of an interested observer. He's done a lot of travelling. Different types of people are his hobby."

"Do you think he has carried any hatred toward the earth and its people?"

"Oh, no. Why should he?"

"He was disappointed in love once, wasn't he?"

"Well, yes, I guess that went pretty deep." Joe met Doyle's eyes. "Yes, he was in love with someone who later married Paul Maddergall."

"But you don't think that disappointment turned into a powerful hatred?"

"No! Emphatically no!" Joe insisted. "He was a very mild person, tender-hearted. He could hardly kill a fly, he was so—so soft! This was his worst fault, if you can call it that."

"Well, thank you, Joe, that answers my question. It just goes to prove that those replies we receive from Venus aren't to be trusted at all."

"Will I see Ruppert again?"

"I don't know, son."

"But do you know where he is?"

"After what you've told me—no, I haven't the slightest idea where he is. He may not even be involved in this trouble at all. He probably isn't. Please just forget that I even mentioned him."

LONG AFTER their conference was over, Joe kept recounting what had been said. The more he studied the matter the less he could make of it. But one word of parting advice he took from Commander Doyle, and passed it along to Dynamo as well. They should attempt nothing before tomorrow. Since the Iron Man had apparently spent himself for the day, Joe and Dynamo would do well to treat themselves to a night's sleep before undertaking their daring action.

"Anything I can help you with?" Dynamo asked as they were nearing the apartment-house entrance. It was natural that he would be curious about the private talk Joe and the commander had had.

"He asked me about Ruppert. Same old story, only now it's the Venus Killers trying to hang something on him."

Dynamo suppressed a groan as if resolving to say nothing.

"I know," Joe said gloomily. "Ruppert's a made-to-order stooge. Back in college days he was the one they blamed for leading the cow into the dean's bedroom during the milk shortage."

"Did he do it?"

"He didn't even know there was a milk shortage. He was off in a museum somewhere droning over the butterfly collection. Chances are, he's off in some remote regions of Jupiter this very night, studying the habits of the natives."

Dyname shrugged. "I don't know why he had to be born into your family."

In the apartment building they descended to their floor, eighteen stories below the surface, and ambled out of the elevator wearily.

"They're inspecting again," the elevator man said casually. "In fact, I think he's in your room now."

"He, *who?*"

"The man that was here before, checking on our underground space."

Joe scowled. He turned back to the elevator man. "Wait a minute. I don't get you."

"It's the emergency," the elevator man said importantly. "Don't you know, people on the surface are being packed in with the people that live down in. They're going around measuring the square feet of space, so they'll

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know—"

"No, no, no," Joe said. "They don't go around measuring. They look at the floor plan, that's all. You mean to tell me you've let some person into our apartment? Did you?"

"Well, I wasn't going to," the elevator man began to hedge. "But he had his papers. He showed me. When he was here before—"

"Here before? *When? What day?*"

"Must have been about two days ago. You can ask him yourself. He's in there now."

"Quick, Dynamo!" Joe said. "This has a phony sound."

THEY HURRIED to the apartment door. It started to open as they neared, but instantly closed. With drawn pistols they moved in, cautiously at first, then darting fast into the room. The lights showed an empty room. Footsteps sounded with a light scampering toward the air shaft in the next room.

"Same visitor!" Dynamo pointed to the study tables where he and Joe kept their papers. On each table stood a gleaming red Venus knife, pointing up.

The clatter of the air vent told them the desperate prowler meant to get out of the place unseen.

"Come back and fight!" Joe yelled. "Come back and show your face."

The slats of the air vent clattered to one side. The slight, grey-clad form of a man was disappearing that way.

"Fool! He'll never climb eighteen floors inside that.

Crack! A pistol shot sounded in the shaft. Heedless of the danger, Joe stuck his head and shoulders through the opening, flung an arm upward into the darkness, and caught the runaway by the ankle. The fellow's pistol must have slipped from his hand. Joe heard it clattering down along the brick shaft to the bottom of the well.

Joe clung to the fellow's ankle and pulled.

"Come easy or fall to a quick death," Joe said.

A brittle tin-like voice snapped an answer. "I've signalled my men. You'd better let go. They're on their way. For your own good you'd better let go."

"You're coming in if I have to tear you apart!" Joe swore, and he put his muscles to the task. Whatever the fellow was hanging to, his hands gave way. He gave a savage little cry, and came with a jerk. Joe tumbled him into the room. Dynamo was on him, removing everything from extra pistol to fountain pen. Then he and Joe stood back to study the little fellow's bruised face under the light.

"The wall kind of battered you up," Dynamo said, "but I think I know you."

The small man glared defiantly. He glanced at the air shaft as though he expected a squad of bodyguards to march in to his rescue.

"Yeah, sure we know him," Joe said. "This is Mouse Moberly, the brain of the Zuber works."

"Right," said Dynamo. "One of my bosses."

"Thank you for the compliments, gentlemen," the battered little man said, dusting his hands. "This is all a mistake which I can explain—"

"You bet it's a mistake! Just dropped in for a friendly visit, did you? Left your calling cards sticking up on our tables. Nice and friendly." Dynamo's tone was rich with sarcasm.

Joe spoke with a fury that ran deep. "Now we know who planted the warning for my brother Lanny. And it's a fair guess that you were back of Senator Droondair's murder too."

"Sort of building yourself for the revolution you and Zuber aim to put over, is that it?" Dynamo said.

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"Mouse Moberly, Grand Mogul of the Metal Monsters. A mighty man is Mouse Moberly—under a magnifying glass!"

"Talk, gentlemen. Say whatever you please. In five minutes you'll both be dead."

"In five minutes," Dynamo said, "you'll be safe in the arms of the law." He started for the telephone.

"Wait, Dynamo," Joe said. "I think I have a better idea. This man is good at climbing up air shafts. He might be good at climbing up the legs of the Iron Man. We'll take him along as a mascot. If we get into a tight place—"

THE DOOR bell rang, and at the same moment Joe thought he heard more sounds coming from the air shaft. Dynamo reached into his coat and brought out a short piece of rope. They tied Mouse hand and foot and carried him to the door. The bell rang again.

"Now, Mouse," Joe said in a low voice, "you're a big boss and you like to have your orders obeyed without any back-talk." His hand was over the little man's mouth. Mouse Moberly was fairly purple with rage. "We're the boss now. You're smart enough to do as we say. Tell the men it's all clear, they can come in. The door's unlocked."

Mouse batted his eyes and tried to nod. Joe let him talk. Mouse spoke sullenly.

"Come on in, Winkler. It's all clear. The door's unlocked."

Winkler opened the door and walked in, a thickset man with protruding eyes and a gravel voice. "What happened? Where's Craddle? What's the matter, are you—ugh!"

Joe stepped up to plant a pistol in Winkler's ribs. Dynamo produced the needed rope, and Winkler was made helpless.

A moment later at the air shaft Joe heard the low, hollow call. "Mouse... Mouse!... Are you coming up, Mouse?"

Joe whispered his order to the well-tamed Mouse Moberly. "Tell him to get to the elevator and come down. Tell him you need him down here."

Ten minutes later the three prowlers sat in discomfort in three living-room chairs. Dynamo stood nearby, playing idly with three red knives. Joe paced the floor, talking like a sergeant with three raw recruits on his hands.

"Now, Mouse—Craddle—Winkler—I've gone over the details, and if you're smart you know there can't be any slip-ups. This job calls for experienced prowlers who know how to climb. I'll wear a headpiece with three ray-pencils attached, one for each of you. I've used them before on trouble-shooting jobs. They're like bloodhounds on your trail, and they're instant death if you make a false move.... Any questions?... Go to sleep, then. We start at four o'clock in the morning."

CHAPTER IX

JOE SLEPT fitfully. All through the night the news flashes sounded quietly from the radio at his bed. He arose at three thirty. The giant monster of metal had paced back and forth through the harbor until three, the newscaster said. No destruction, however, had taken place during the night. "The Iron Man is temporarily at rest.... He has crouched down on one elbow.... He is resting on the area of rubble where he destroyed buildings a few hours ago.... Efforts to communicate with him, either by radio or by signal, have failed completely.... Yet the theories persist that he has behaved with human intelligence.... His path of destruction

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has presented a strange pattern that defies analysis.... He chose to destroy several public buildings not far from the shore.... He crushed the fine new interplanetary museum...."

That would be a shock to Ruppert, Joe thought, for the new museum had been one of Ruppert's favorite haunts.

"...He moved down one row of buildings, smashing each one in turn ...until he came to a certain gambling den with a very bad reputation.... This he passed over."

Dynamo, also listening, shook his sleepy head. "If I've had any suspicions of your brother Ruppert, I apologize. He couldn't possibly have any influence with the Venus Killers if they passed over the gambling dens."

"You remember?"

"I remember there was nothing Ruppert hated worse than gambling. He was hipped on the subject. If he had had an iron fist the size of that monster's, he'd have pulverized every gambling house in the country."

"Thank you," Joe said.

"For what?"

"For saying something fair about my older brother. He's a perfectly swell person—just a little different from other folks. The girl he almost married thought he was a great guy. But don't you see what's happened?"

"You mean Maddergall?"

"Yes. Maddergall smears him with suspicion, and other folks pick it up. The Venus Killers need a scapegoat so they answer Commander Doyle's notes and try to make him think our trouble comes from one of our own men—Ruppert. The bad reputation started with one malicious lie, and look where it's got. Even you, my best friend, have begun to talk like Ruppert is something poison."

"Gee, gollies, I didn't mean to. Dynamo offered his hand. "I'll never say another word against him as long as I live. It's a promise."

THEY CUT the handshake short as the radio announced the time. They called Commander Doyle and received the word they needed from his office. They awakened their three well-bound recruits, untied their feet, and marched them to the elevator, out the door, and into a taxi.

Twenty minutes later the five of them were moving gingerly up the long horizontal steel beam that formed the lower left leg of the Iron Man.

Winkler and Craddle moved sluggishly at the head of the line. They yammered like whipped truants. They wanted fire-arms. Joe wouldn't even let them have a club. They complained that their recently bound wrists were too weak for climbing. But the sort of sympathy they got from Dynamo didn't encourage them to talk.

"If you slip back," Dynamo said, "I'll catch you on one of these Venus death knives. I've got three, compliments of Mouse Moberly and Company."

"If you think that was my idea," Mouse spat, "you're badly mistaken. I'm just a pawn in this game."

"That ain't what you told us," Winkler called back.

"Shut your head," Mouse snapped.

"Get on, get on, you're stalling," Joe ordered.

The big monster of metal was lying quietly, propped up on one elbow. The lower beam of the leg was resting at an easy angle of approximately thirty degrees. This position, together with the aid of the magnetic grips which the men wore on their shoes, made the climbing no difficult trick. They had begun at the Iron Man's ankles, which rested in the water, their approach having been made by boat.

When they ascended toward the knee, Joe realized that a bad moment was ahead. The position of the Iron

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Man was such that the march from the knee joint to the pelvis would be downhill. Since Winkler, Craddle and Mouse were in the lead, they would get the benefit of the downhill trail first. If they saw their opportunity in time they might race away, out of range, before Joe could cross the knee.

He tried to crowd close on their heels. Mouse slipped, fell forward, and acted hurt. He limped.

"Move along. Move along."

"I cracked my arm."

"You don't walk on your arm. Move on. Faster. Faster."

THE OTHER two men were already at the knee. They scrambled over, and the next moment they were out of sight somewhere on the other side. Joe glanced to the shore, all of sixty feet below. They wouldn't chance a jump-off here, but if they got down to those narrow steel hips, out of range, they might make their escape. He hurried Mouse over the big slippery knee joint, and then he saw. The other two men were making a run for it.

"Stop! Stop or I'll cut you down!"

They were already out of range and they knew it. The pencil rays on his headpiece spat two lines of death, like tracer bullets in the early morning twilight. Their light sent reflected gleams along half the length of the Iron Man's upper leg. Winkler and Craddle were never touched.

"They're gone!" Dynamo muttered, close behind Joe. He fired two pistol shots. The man, untouched, leaped the gap toward the wide band of copper-colored metal that circled the hips like a strap.

Flash! The copper band met them with a wave of purple fire. Joe saw them move weirdly. They had landed without a fall, but they had been automatically electrocuted. They rolled up in convulsive movements that ended in death.

The great iron monster stirred slightly. Joe, Dynamo and Mouse clung tight, watching. They saw the bodies of Winkler and Craddle slip like stuffed sacks and across the hips to the ground. The Iron Man stirred as if to find a more comfortable position, and rolled over on them. Mouse turned back to face Joe with a look of horror in his eyes.

Dynamo said, "Nothing like that ever happened in an air shaft, I reckon."

"Take me back," Mouse said. "Get me out of here."

"You mean you don't want to follow them?" Joe said. "It's a good thing we brought you boys along. That might have happened to us. All right, Mouse, take it calm. You're still leading the way, only we're changing the direction."

"We're going back?" Mouse said eagerly.

"Is your bad arm troubling you too much?"

"It's all right."

They marched back down toward the ankle. Dynamo's eyes expressed curiosity, but he waited for Joe to call the play.

"We're going to try a hunch," Joe said. "Unless I'm mistaken, we'll bump into a trap door somewhere down this way."

They padded along the lower extremity of the leg where it disappeared in the shallow water. Joe swept his bare arm back and forth over the metal surface and presently he found what he was looking for.

"Here it is, Dynamo. This gadget that looks like a steel wart. You touch it and it buzzes like an electric buzzer, and everything flies in, you and I and Mouse, all together. Move this way a little."

"Get me out of this!" Mouse said. "I've had enough. I'll do whatever you

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say, but get me out of this."

"All set?" Joe asked. "Hold tight to Mouse, Dynamo, so he won't take a notion to jump."

"All set," said Dynamo. "I hope you know what we're doing."

JOE PUSHED the button. Two panels slipped inward and a whoosh of wind sounded.

"Roll in!" Joe shouted. It was a superfluous command. They were rolling, drawn by the rush of wind into the big vacuum capsule. They tumbled together, the panels slid shut, and the capsule darted into motion. The low whissss became a barely audible screech as they gathered speed. They slowed for a sharp turn, and Joe knew they had passed the knee joint. Thin bars of blue light illuminated the gliding car. Both Dynamo and Mouse looked like death.

The next whirling curve was taken at high speed. Joe held his breath. This was the zone where the electro-cutting rays had worked, out on the surface of the Iron Man's hips. But that danger spot was already passed. The car was rising into the chest.

"We're coming up!" Dynamo cried against the fine screech.

Joe had the same sensation—as though the Iron Man were rising.

"We're riding wild," Mouse muttered. "We're going round in circles."

"You're used to air shafts, that's all," Dynamo cracked.

They groped for a solid footing in the rounded end of the capsule and knew they were rising straight up into the iron giant's head. They slowed up and drew to a stop. The door opened and they clambered out dizzily.

They were on a high observation platform within the frame of the Iron Man's head. Thin lines of light illuminated its emptiness. The outer rail offered a view down into the depths of the machinery-filled chest. Joe could see dimly the division lines of the great metal units that had come together to form the body.

"Hold up, there, Mouse," Dynamo barked. "We'll all explore this tin soldier together."

Mouse had moved toward the big sphere that occupied the central position within the circular platform. The inner rail surrounding the sphere recessed toward a single oval-shaped door, bright silver within a red metal frame.

"I never figured we'd find this place deserted," Dynamo said. "Shall we try the steel igloo? That must be the brain of the works."

They first made two rounds of the circular platform, pistols ready for trouble. They saw not a sign of a human being. The only sounds were the low, smooth hums of power units somewhere down in the vast steel chest.

"We're standing up, all right," Joe said. "There's the city below us."

Open-air slits in the circular walls gave brief glimpses of the dawn-lit world below them. Mouse was staring, as much surprised as anyone by the unsatisfactory view the narrow windows afforded.

"You can't see enough from here to take aim at anything," Joe said. "There's got to be a better vision than this somewhere."

"It must be in that igloo brain," Dynamo said, "or else this devilish thing is being operated from the outside."

"Here's where we go in." Joe turned to Mouse, who was keeping a sullen face and a silent tongue. "Step ahead, Big Shot. Here's where you earn your passage."

Joe motioned toward the silver door in the red frame. He put a pistol to Mouse's back.

"Open it real quiet-like and peek in. If you don't get your everlasting at

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first glance, move on in and we'll follow. And Dynamo—check the door as it opens. Make sure it doesn't close on us."

"I'll give it a steel block." Dynamo reached into his coat. "What about the explosives?"

"Wait till we see what's in the sphere."

"Okay, lead the way."

MOUSE HESITATED. Joe prompted him with the pistol. Mouse's quivering hand reached out to the latch. At his touch the door swung open silently. Mouse glanced back. Joe motioned him to go on. Dynamo bent quietly to fasten a solid block in the door. Single file the three of them tiptoed into the big empty ball of white light.

It *seemed* empty, it was so large, and it contained so little. The lightness of it burned Joe's eyes at first. He tried to look all directions at once. The staff of Venus Killers he had expected to find was not here.

"The Iron Man is moving," Dynamo whispered. "There's some kind of window across the way—or is it a screen?"

It was an odd sort of mirror. It must have been fed by lenses all around the giant's head. It had the curve of half a sphere, and it condensed the cyclorama, with hardly any distortion, bringing in the view from all directions at once. Looking across into it, Joe saw the sky, the rising sun, and the wide stretch of land and ocean. It afforded a downward view of the towering form itself.

"No wonder the old boy can spot his enemies from all directions," Dynamo said. "With this gadget he could see a fly on his big toe and a spider-web on the moon at the same time. Is he moving?"

"Sure is," Joe muttered. "Hope we don't go on a rampage."

The spherical room in which they stood was hung to maintain its upright position, no matter how the Iron Man might bend about. He was now bending forward. Joe saw the blaze of the spotlight come to a focus on a line of railway tracks a little distance in from the shore—the first thing he himself had looked at.

A surge of dread filled Joe as he watched. He had the horrible premonition that the monster was about to reach down and tear up the tracks. At the same time Joe saw the faint smile on the lips of Mouse Moberly. "Mouse hopes it will happen," Joe thought. "Mouse would like to see this beast of steel tear up a hundred cities so the Venus invaders could pour in."

The steel monster reached a hand down toward the tracks. Then, to Joe's consternation, the arm drew back. The monster took his headlight off the rail line and straightened up.

"He's stopped," Dynamo said. "He's not going to do it after all."

"Did you touch anything, Dynamo?"

"No, I'm standing right here by you."

"Did you—"

Mouse shook his head.

"Something governed that action," Joe said. "If we can find out what, we'll know how to control this deadly heap of iron."

"It's automatic," said Mouse with a cold metallic voice.

"Well, listen at who's talking," said Dynamo. "Maybe you want to tell us all about it."

"Anyone can see," Mouse said. "We got into the elevator and it went up. Automatic. Winkler and Craddle took the wrong route and ran into an electric fence. Automatic."

"But that's only part of the story," Joe said. "It's like a man. The heart beats. Automatic. The skin breathes. Automatic. But the eyes look down on

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something that could be destroyed, and what decides? What? Tell me that."

"Automatic," said Mouse.

"Automatic, hell. A minute ago we started to tear up a railroad track. I was scared it would happen. You, Mouse, you wanted it to happen. I saw it in your eye. But how did the darn thing decide?" Joe's eyes swept the rounded ceiling of light. "Is there something in these walls that picks up our thoughts and translates them into action?"

"I think you've hit it right there," Dynamo said.

"We're getting darn close."

Mouse scoffed. "For the last twenty-four hours it has been making what you call decisions, one after another. If all those actions were the reflections of some man's wish, where's the man? Here we find an empty room. Whose thoughts are here to be picked up? There's no one here."

"I'm not so sure," Joe said. "There's something over this way we haven't seen."

"There's room for a man," Dynamo said. "There's all the conveniences of a prison cell." He began poking around among the chests of drawers built into one side of the wall. "There's concentrated food supplies here for a year. There's a water supply, there's a bath—"

"And a small bed," Joe said, "and someone on it."

Back of the electric window, previously obscured from their view, was the cot where the one lone occupant of the Iron Man's head lay, apparently asleep.

"Stir him out of it," Dynamo said.

Joe didn't move. He stared, standing frozen over the pale, glassy-eyed man who looked up at him.

"That must be the devil that's doing all the dirty work," Dynamo said. "Stir him out of it."

Joe reached down and put his hand on the man's wrist. "Ruppert," he said, "What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER X

IT WAS A day to be long remembered. For some it was the last day of life on this earth. Fear turned to panic. Terror spread around the globe like wildfire. Each hour of the day new alarms sounded across the continents and over the oceans.

Two new iron men appeared. Great warlike flying ships from the planet Venus were on their way. Seventeen were seen moving in squadron formation around the earth. The sky station six hours out from the earth was captured. Several nearer points were considered expendable. The Lazy Meteor was evacuated.

Newscasters worked like heroes to bring the earth a graphic account of what was happening. Planes and space ships buzzed and whirred and screamed through the skies. Television cameras loaded the air with spectacular scenes from all directions.

In their underground refuges, millions of people watched, horrified. Women as well as children cried and screamed whenever the television screen brought in pictures of the great iron killers, the deadly Iron Men of Venus.

Iron Man Number One waited in the harbor, poised to deliver a death stroke to any ship or building or railway that might take his fancy.

Iron Man Number Two, who appeared in the screen as identical with Number One, was stalking down the coast like a hungry beast. He was showing one of the same whims as Number One: he preferred public buildings. He might have been looking for the capitols of earth governments. With great handfuls of debris from towers he had crushed, he attacked any court or court house or

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provincial capitol building. He walked inland and ripped up the public parks with his mighty iron feet.

Iron Man Number Three showed a curious preference for airports and spaceports. He walked over the city, unmindful of the rows of apartment houses he was crushing with every step. When he looked down upon the new, modern port where many interplanetary lines had their headquarters, he appeared to go into a rage.

"That is Iron Man Number Three you are watching," the voice explained over television. "He has just demolished the new ten-million-dollar station of the All-Mars Tours."

Watchers who had the fortitude to take in the gruesome sights saw him killing the people who streamed out from the spaceport buildings.

"He's the fiercest of the three," the newscaster declared. "He spares no fence or wire or signal."

THEN THE picture would color up with yellow dust as Number Three went into a rage of kicking. Walls toppled. Fires broke out. Red flames and black clouds of billowing smoke were everywhere.

"There, he's stopped," the announcer said suddenly. "The big guns were trying for him. Maybe they got him.... Just a moment, I'll have an official report for you.... No, he has stopped, mysteriously. He has not been struck. It must be that some signal stopped him. Perhaps there is an unseen general directing these Iron Men.... However, we may have more a little later. As you know, Iron Man Number One has been entered by our forces. The three men who entered are being quizzed at the present moment."

The announcer paused, as if viewing the picture of the boiling smoke.

"I give you my own theory for what it may be worth," the anouncer continued. "I believe they are like gigantic tin soldiers, wound up to go a certain length of time. When they run down they stop."

Another newscaster cut in. "The theory you have just heard is not official. However, in support of this view I offer you these two evidences."

Here the screen flashed on a shot of Iron Man Number One, bent toward a railway, but definitely stopped in action. Then came the picture of Iron Man Number Three, standing tall and forbidding amid the fury of flame and smoke, but making no motion.

"Are these Iron men through? Have they shot their wad? Is their show over? Let us hope! but even so, this may be only a preliminary flurry of terrorizing, to precede the real attack by ships."

And so it went, through the underground houses and apartment buildings and storm cellars—wherever people had gathered to wait in fear.

Somewhere twenty-five floors under the surface, Claire Maddergall waited, eyes closed. Her husband was away, taking part in the investigations. Little Penny kept besieging her with questions and protests.

"But Mama, do we have to stay down here? Can't we go where Papa is? If the first Iron Man isn't killing anymore, can't we go up and drive out in the car and see him?"

"No, child, don't even think of such a thing."

"Then he is still dangerous, isn't he, Mama?"

"We don't know, dear."

"I wish we could go out and see him. If we'd drive by real fast he couldn't do anything to us, could he, Mama? Could he?"

"We don't know, Penny. Please don't think about it."

"He wouldn't want to kill you, Mama, if he knew how nice you are. He might kill some other folks, but

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not you."

"Being nice doesn't seem to make any difference."

"He might kill Papa, mightn't he?"

"Why, Penny!"

"I mean if he kills everybody—"

"Yes, dear." Claire slipped her arm around the child's body, and wondered whether her little thoughts had found room for some suspicion of Paul Maddergall. How much might a little child know? And how much was there to know about Paul, his secret dealings with Zuber and Mouse Moberly and the Venus Storm Colony? Claire trembled to ask herself such questions.

But she did ask them over and over as her suspicions of her husband grew. How simple it would be, she thought suddenly, for her and little Penny to get into their new red sports car and spin straight down the avenue toward the Iron Man. Yes, within reach of it.

And if it should strike—

If it should, she and her child would never have to know how deep was her husband's guilt, or how vast his traitorous actions.

"Penny," Claire said suddenly, "would you like very much to take a ride in our new red car—"

"To look at the Iron Man?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, Mama, could we?"...

SOMEWHERE in the mountains, many miles from the scenes of destruction, an aged man and his daughter watched the little television screen. Every hour they breathed their quiet thanks to the young man who had been so kind to them. They might have been left in the path of ruin, as helpless as babes. But Joe Kane had happened to come their way, and had given them the will and the courage—and the money—to escape.

"Mary," the old man called feebly. "Mary, come and see. It's him again. It's that boy Kane. See at the right of the screen. They're questioning him again."....

ELEVATOR service was bad all day in the underground apartment building where Joe Kane lived. The elevator man was too busy running off to the handiest television screens.

"That's him. That's Joe, all right. And there's his pal, Dynamo. They're the boys that climbed into the Iron Man to see what makes him tick."

"You mean those boys live right here in this building?"

"Eighteen floors down. I haul 'em back and forth every day."

"Isn't that where we heard the prowlers last night?"

"Yessiree. Joe and Dynamo catched all three of them—with my help, that is. I sprung the trap for 'em, and they did the rest. I could have had my picture in the paper, but me, I'm just naturally modest.... Looks like I ought to be there helpin' Joe right now, the way they're firin' the questions at him. They're tyin' him in knots, sounds like.... Gee whiz, what does that guy mean, tryin' to accuse Joe?"...

CHAPTER XI

THE NEWSCASTERS had praised Joe and Dynamo only a few minutes before. Very daring chaps. They had found their way into the Iron Man's brain. What they knew might help to turn the tide.

But ironically, the quizzing of important men suddenly put Joe and Dynamo on the defensive.

"What is your explanation, Mr. Dink, about the explosives? Why didn't you plant them in his head and set them off as planned?"

"I—I don't know," Dynamo stammered. "Joe was the boss. I guess we were so dizzy we forgot."

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"Dizzy? You were grossly inefficient," Paul Maddergall said. "I don't think you ever intended to obey the command."

"But we were dizzy. It was like on a high building, only higher. And when it moved we could feel ourselves weaving around. You should go up, Mr. Maddergall," Dynamo said frankly. "Mouse Moberly said he was going around in circles."

"Mr. Kane," Maddergall said, taking a sadistic delight in this new chance to make Joe squirm, "it's up to you to answer the questions. You are on the spot, Mr. Kane. Do you understand?"

Joe narrowed his eyes in the direction of the brittle questioner. "I understand, sir, that I didn't accomplish everything. But I've made a start. And what I did was done in good faith."

The other men around the table were made uneasy by Maddergall's tactics, but he meant to play the game his way. He beat his fist upon the table. "Your expedition involved three men who went under protest. Two of them lost their lives. You say you entered the mechanical brain of the Iron Man, and that you believe his actions are the result of this brain's workings—in response to the will of its occupants. You had a chance to set off explosions in the brain, yet you didn't. Are you following me, Mr. Kane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Worst of all," Maddergall pointed an accusing finger in Joe's face, "when you discovered the man who occupied this diabolical brain, what did you do? Did you treat him as an enemy and shoot him on the spot? No. You ran the risk of taking him prisoner. And when you brought him back to us, what did we find? We found that he was your brother. Right?"

"I guess so, sir."

"You guess so! Indeed!"

"But even if he hadn't been my brother I'd have tried to bring him back here alive—for questioning."

Much to Joe's relief, Commander Doyle nodded his approval. "Yes, you're certainly right on that point. With more Iron Men moving in on us, I consider the most important immediate step in our campaign is to discover the key to these monsters' actions."

Maddergall was quick to put himself on the right side. "Exactly, Commander. I was just coming to that. What I'm asking Mr. Kane is, did he find the key—the trick—the secret—the gadget—whatever you want to call the process by which these steel beasts guide their actions? The obvious answer is, he did not. He was right in the presence of it, and he muffed it."

"But Mr. Maddergall—" Chairman Helva started to protest; but Paul Maddergall would not be stopped.

"He muffed his chance. How do we know but what he failed on purpose? I hereby charge him and his brother Ruppert with high treason against the governments of the earth!"

JOE SAW that his hands were white as chalk. The sergeant-at-arms was glaring at him, just daring him to try any rough stuff. Yet something made him rise and point squarely at Maddergall. He wanted to say that Maddergall would pay for that false charge. But when he found his voice, quavering with anger, he said nothing of the kind.

"If you really want to find the secret of the Iron Man—why don't you let my brother help? Or is he still alive?"

The eyes of the men around the table turned to Dr. Kenilworth, a short, keen-eyed young man with a plump face and a thin black mustache. His voice was gentle but strong with authority.

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"Ruppert Kane has been too ill for questioning. He has been the victim of severe shock. I don't think that anything he might say at the present time would have the slightest value—however, those in charge are making careful records. If you would like, I'll give you a recording of our conversations."

The committee of inquiry listened eagerly. The voice of Ruppert was like the voice of a mother or a father moved with deep grief over the loss of a child. It was a cry, a heart-rending chant, a sobbing plea for peace... for no more killing...no more destroying... "Please, no! No, no, it mustn't happen."

Maddergall, looking very sour to see how things were going, muttered, "Sounds like he got his fill of it. More than he bargained for. But I wouldn't trust him to go back into that iron monster."

"Where is he now?" Commander Doyle asked.

The doctor smiled. "You may think it strange, but I have placed him out in the sunshine on the open plaza at the top of this building."

"Where he can watch the Iron Man?"

"Yes, that's so. I consider that we are at a safe distance. It seems to give him relief and assurance to know that the monster is not moving."

"If he thinks he can win any mercy for himself with a ruse like that—" But Maddergall was cut short.

"Just a moment," Commander Doyle said. "If I may have the floor—"

Chairman Helva gratefully recognized the commander. "Go ahead, Doyle. Untangle this if you can."

"Thank you." The commander turned a sharp look on Joe and Dynamo. "These boys, in my opinion, have done a heroic thing, even if they fell short of our hopes in some respects. I think it only fair that we give them another chance—that is, if they want it."

Everyone looked at Joe, waiting for him to speak. He stared at his hands. Dynamo remained silent.

"What do you say, men? Have you the nerve to go again?"

Joe spoke slowly. "We have the nerve—yes. If it is your command, we'll go. Otherwise—"

THE ROOM, almost completely silent, echoed the sound of light tottering footsteps entering the open door. Everyone turned at the sound of a broken voice, speaking huskily. In the doorway stood Ruppert Kane, his eyes staring like death, his hand trembling. A hospital attendant supported him as he moved into the room.

"I heard," he said. "I came to say ...that you, Joe...you must not enter the Iron Man's head...again. Rather than have you go...I would kill you."

That was what he had come to say. He turned around and the hospital attendant led him out.

"I see it!" Joe came to his feet suddenly, breaking the silence that had taken possession of the room. "I'm not *sure,* but I know how to *prove*—no, that wouldn't be possible. It might take days—still—"

"If you're talking to yourself," said Chairman Helva, "you're getting nowhere. But if you're ready to prove how the Iron Men work, I'm in favor of giving you another chance."

"It won't be easy. But it will prove—yes! I'm almost sure!" Joe was talking excitedly. Dynamo nudged him and he did his best to slow down. "Could we possibly raid those Venus ships and capture a few men—at least three—three who are sure to want to destroy us?"

"In a matter of hours we might work it," Commander Doyle said.

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"No, we needn't wait for hours. We can do it now!"

"What are you talking about?" Maddergall demanded.

"*You!* You, Maddergall—sir!" Joe pointed toward him eagerly. "You're the very one to prove it. It can be proved at once!"

They stared at him speechless. But Commander Doyle must have recognized a spark in his eye that meant he knew what he was talking about. Doyle, standing tall and tense, said, "Gentlemen, I don't know what this boy wants, but I'm in favor of letting him have his way, at any cost. Is there anyone here who would stand in his way?"

"Did he say it involved me?" Maddergall asked.

"You!" Joe said. "You'd be the one to put the theory to a test! If you want to solve our trouble, *you can't say no.* Are you *for us?*"

Maddergall got up storming. "Who the devil is this brat of a kid to question my loyalty?"

"Quiet,'" Helva shouted, rapping the table. "We've all voted to take a chance. Are you with us, Maddergall?"

"Not at the price of my life."

"Even if it saves the lives of millions?"

Maddergall reddened. "Let's hear the scheme. What is it?"

"Just this," Joe said. "You make the trip up into the Iron Man's head. You enter the brain alone. You stay for an hour. Then you come back down."

"You mean I go alone?"

"Take a bodyguard if you wish, to make sure you get back safely—just so you enter the brain alone."

"What if the thing starts acting up while I'm inside?"

Commander Doyle said, "The answer to that is, you figure out *why* it's acting up. But one other question, Joe. Is there any reason why Maddergall should go instead of someone else?"

"Every reason. As long as only Maddergall enters the brain, I'm pretty sure that nothing will be destroyed."

Ten minutes later, Paul Maddergall and a party of four hand-picked guards set out for the ankle entrance to the Iron Man.

CHAPTER XII

WITHIN A few minutes after Maddergall and his bodyguard had left, Commander Doyle approached Joe and said, "Now would you mind telling just what kind of brainstorm this is?"

"You're the one I trust," Joe said. "I'll tell it all to you—and anyone who will believe me. You see, Dynamo and I have been barnstorming around mostly by trial and error, but at the same time—hey, what happened to Dynamo?"

"He left," the commander said. "He asked my permission. I'm trusting him the same as I would you."

Joe looked about in a state of worry. "I hope he didn't get a notion to go up into one of those Iron Men again."

"The fact is, that's where he's going. He had heard that Iron Man Number Three has stopped moving, and he said he thought he could find his way in."

"But he mustn't," Joe said excitedly. "Can we stop him? If not he'll tear up the earth."

Doyle put a calming hand on Joe's shoulder. "He said you'd be worried. He said to tell you he was taking Mouse Moberly for a mascot and that Mouse would be with him every minute."

Joe stared for a moment with a blank expression, then began to smile. "Say, maybe Dynamo knows what the score is too. He'll have Mouse with him every minute? Well...yes, it

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might be all right."

They ascended to the plaza on the surface. Dr. Kenilworth, who had been talking with Ruppert, making certain his patient was comfortable and well attended, came over to join Joe and the commander.

"Joe," Commander Doyle said, "is about to give us his explanation of the Iron Men's antics. But first he wanted to ask you about the experiments on brain waves, electrical accompaniments to emotional states and the like. Are you familiar with this field, doctor?"

Kenliworth said, "Unfortunately, the greatest experimenter and I should say the greatest authority in this field was cut short in his earth career. This happened several years ago. He was involved in some criminal activities and was deported to the penal colony in Venus."

"Then it's possible," Joe said, "that these Venus Killers have made new advances in this line?"

"They've very likely outdistanced us. Is this, you think, the basis of the Iron Man's brain?"

"Yes—that is—I'm almost sure—it's this, *with* a complication."

"Meaning what?"

"That whatever one wishes while he's inside the Iron Man's brain, the brain executes that wish—*in reverse.*"

The three men walked along the railing of the plaza, looking across the harbor to the tall figure of Iron Man Number One, towering into the low summer clouds. He was bent a trifle, as if intending to make wreckage of the railway yards beneath him.

"For example?" said Commander Doyle.

"For example, the way Number One has struck down everything that my brother Ruppert would not want injured. If Ruppert awoke to find himself in the Iron Monster, walking up out of the ocean by some automatic mechanism, the first thing that would occur to Ruppert would be the danger of striking a boat. His frenzy of fear that the boat might be hit would be received by the electric brain around him—and reversed. In other words, changed into a wish to destroy. And the Iron Man's mechanism would go into action to fullfill the reversed wish."

"Yes, go on."

"My brother Ruppert would look down in terror and see a few survivors. He would wish them safety. The big steel monster would pick them up and put them to death."

"I recall," said the doctor, "that the Iron Man made wreckage of the Interplanetary Musuem."

"One of my brother's favorite haunts."

"On the other hand it passed over the well known gambling house—"

"Which was perhaps the one place in the city that Ruppert would wish destroyed... As long as he saw the destruction going on, he was too concerned to turn away from the view; and the more he watched, the more his sympathies were aroused—which, in turn, prompted more destruction."

"H-m-m. I wonder," Commander Doyle puzzled. "I wonder why the Venus Killers should have chosen to set it up in that reversed arrangement. Why not occupy the Iron Men themselves, and let their own destructive wishes be carried out directly?"

"Possibly they wanted to dodge their own guilt as long as possible,"

"Yes, but more important, they don't trust each other," Joe said. "They seem to cooperate, all right, when they're coming to attack us. But from what Ruppert has told me I know that they hate each other. If they had occupied the Iron Men themselves, their real wishes would have been felt and they would have been at each other's throats. It was safer for them to put the whole

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business in reverse, and let innocent people like Ruppert be their tools."

THE COMMANDER interrupted. "Look, the Iron Man is beginning to move. That means that Maddergall has now entered the brain. The monster is coming to life again."

"If the destruction begins all over," the doctor said, "he'll surely have the wits to come out."

"He was supposed to stay an hour," Joe said.

"An hour's destruction is a high price to pay for the proof we wanted."

"But I'm convinced there'll be no destruction," Joe said. "That's why I insisted on Maddergall."

"You mean—"

"I happen to know he'd like a path of death and ruin to make way for his Venus friends. No matter what he's saying to himself this minute as he stands in the Iron Man's brain, the wish is there, burning in his heart and his mind. The monster will give us that wish in reverse. It will refuse to destroy."

Commander Doyle held binoculars to his eyes, taking in the massive head that peered down through the thin clouds. Sometimes the spotlight, brightly ablaze through the afternoon light, played across the waters toward the plaza. At other times it illuminated the lines of traffic moving at what was considered a safe distance.

The doctor was regarding Joe with interest. "If what you believe is true, Kane, how does it happen that no great destruction took place while you were up in the Iron Man's head? I should think your love for our ships and harbors and buildings and parks would have resulted in some hard pounding of those iron fists."

Joe smiled. "I played in luck. I happened to have someone with me who came under protest—Mouse Moberly, Old Man Zuber's top executive. That little hard-willed devil walked into the brain at the same time I did, with a pistol at his back. Whatever Dynamo and I may have wished while we were in there, Mouse's traitorous wishes counteracted us. But this I remember distinctly. We had gotten Ruppert out onto the platform and were about the take the elevator down when I decided to go back for a final look. For a moment Mouse wasn't there to counterbalance me. In that moment the Iron Man reached down and tore up a big railway station and half a mile of track. And in that minute or two I knew what an awful thing Ruppert had gone through. There couldn't be a more frustrating experience. You look down at one person; you scream, hoping he'll get out of the way—and the steel hand instantly kills him. When that happens four or five times, you begin to get the feeling that you're doing it. Every good wish makes you all the more guilty. In a little while you'd go mad."

The doctor nodded. He looked across to Ruppert. "I can begin to understand what that poor fellow has been through."

"He was completely down when we found him."

"Exhaustion. A sort of spiritual exhaustion." The doctor brightened. "I believe, though, that he has the constitution to come out of it."

Alarms were sounding. The iron monster had begun to take great strides across the harbor. It was in fact moving in the general direction of the plaza where the commander, Joe and the doctor were standing.

"We'd better go down under," the doctor said. "We'll have to move the patient down. I don't want any nervous relapses."

Ruppert was shaking his head. He was asking the attendant to let him stay. Commander Doyle was standing his ground, too, as if the sirens hadn't

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penetrated his ears. He was watching intently through the binoculars. Suddenly he said, "Joe, what happens if Maddergall sees something he likes very much—something he loves?"

"The Iron Man would destroy it. Whatever Maddergall's wish, the monster will play it in reverse. Why? What do you see?"

"Something red in the Iron Man's hand. He picked it up out of the traffic just before he started over this way. It's an automobile. There's a lady and a child in it."

CHAPTER XIII

"STAND CLOSE by me," Ruppert said to the others in his weak voice. He was watching the Iron Man move across the harbor toward them.

"Are you afraid?" the doctor asked.

"Not for myself. For you. I'm in no danger. You see, Maddergall hates me like poison...so the iron hands won't touch me."

Joe patted Ruppert on the shoulder. Clear thoughts were coming back to that tortured mind. It was plain that Ruppert had discovered for himself the awful relationship between wish and action within the monster's complex makeup.

"It's coming closer. It's shining its light on us. What's going to happen?" The doctor stood courageously, almost defiantly. The dark steel form came towering over them. In its hand it held the red sports roadster—held it cunningly, so that the two occupants being carried high above the water sat in safety.

The headlight blazed down, making the plaza look like a stage. It was a strange drama that took place there. Only those who understood the reverse of motives could appreciate what was happening. The Iron Man worked rapidly and precisely, as if knowing exactly what he wanted to do. The huge fingers set the car down within a few feet of Ruppert. In a steel grasp that couldn't have been entirely tender, the fingers lifted Claire from the car and placed her beside Ruppert. With a definite motion of persuasion, it pushed the two of them toward each other.

"The very thing that Maddergall wants least in the world—for them to come back together," Commander Doyle murmured, nodding toward Joe.

Joe, however, was foreseeing something that looked very much like murder. Little Penny had been left sitting in the car. Like her mother, she was speechless from awe and terror. Claire Maddergall cried toward her, then fell into a faint. The doctor and Ruppert drew her back into the shelter of an alcove, and Joe only hoped they would find their way down out of sight before the Iron Man committed his next inevitable deed.

Now the big hand swept roughly at the car which contained the six-year-old child. It skidded sidewise across the plaza. It bumped against the railing and for an instant the hand paused. Joe was on the run, and the split second of hesitation gave him his chance. He leaped for the car, caught the side, clung like a bulldog. The child was screaming.

The rail was knocked out as if made of toothpicks. The car was swept over into the harbor. Joe went down with it. Metal was crunching around him. He rolled frantically and wrapped the child in his arms. He plunged out as the car swooshed down into the water.

He dived deep. The child might drown in his arms. That would be better than allowing it to be crushed in the grip of steel.

He struggled to swim under water. The child's fingers dug into his flesh. Strangely he was thinking of Maddergall. Up in that twisted brain Maddergall must be watching it all happen, unable to take his eyes from the hor-

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ror of it, screaming inwardly against the tragedy of it. If so, his love for his child only hastened the Iron Man's deadly strokes. Through the water came the sounds of crunching metal once again. Then a whosh of water told Joe that the monster hand had lifted and gone.

The low concussions of giant footsteps sounded. The Iron Man walked a few steps and came to a stop. Perhaps Maddergall had emerged from the brain by this time.

Joe came to the surface gasping for air. The drowned child in his arms was a sad sight. He moved along the path at the shore line, uncertain which way to go. Then he saw the doctor and Commander Doyle rushing down to him. The doctor took the child. There was always a chance, if they worked fast and carefully....

THE ATTACK of seventeen warships out of space began at sundown. The whole armada came on before midnight. The earth's defenses met them head on. For three days the attack continued with fierce intensity. Then the surviving Venus Killers limped back across the skies, soundly defeated.

The earth had withstood the test. Though several major cities had suffered severe blows, the invaders' campaign failed to come off as planned. It was stymied by surprise actions on the part of the Iron Men. These monsters of Venus steel had miraculously turned against their builders and gone to the side of the defenders. A simple switch had turned the trick. Locked within their brains were the three men who hoped passionately to profit from a Venus victory—Moberly, Zuber and Maddergall.

These three, the best of friends in their world of schemes, were perfect for their job. As the Venus warships flew in over the Iron Men in their carefully planned routine, blazing pistols from the monsters' guns sliced them from stem to stern. They fell in heaps with their loads of bombs and men.

The earth could only guess how its three traitors felt to bring such a defeat upon themselves. The men locked in the brains must have been inspired to march up onto the continents and destroy everything with their own iron hands. They must have—for their wish was reversed by the giants of steel. Disobedient as always, the Iron Men moved out to sea. There, it was related by scouting planes, Moberly and Zuber recognized each other, and would gladly have joined forces. But their deep friendship now boomeranged. The two Iron Men fought each other with the ferocity of war to the death, and went down into the sea fighting.

Maddergall, it was believed, wanted nothing more than to go back to his wife, to possess her, and to make amends, if possible, for murdering his own daughter. Instead, the stubborn monster took him deeper and deeper into the ocean. It was said to have come to rest a hundred feet below the surface somewhere out in the Atlantic. "He has food and water for a year," came the report of the earth governments. "He will not be disturbed."

Many soft-hearted people, however, felt that he should have been informed, somehow, that his six-year old daughter had escaped the fate of the Iron Man's death grip. She had been rescued almost miraculously by Joe Kane; the water had been expelled from her lungs and life breathed into her by the swift actions of Dr. Kenilworth. Her mother, Clair, had found Ruppert again, and would no longer bear the name of Maddergall.

JOE HAD wondered all along about the earth men who had been forced into the Iron Men's brains,

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and who—besides Ruppert—had undergone this ordeal. He was not surprised to learn that Iron Man Number Two had contained a highly patriotic citizen whose murder had been cunningly faked to mask his disappearance. Senator Droondair, thought murdered, had actually been snatched by Killer spies to be used in one of the monster brain compartments.

As to the occupant of Iron Man Number Three, Joe was left in the dark during the thick of the battle. He was a pretty busy man during those tense hours. He had been made a special aide to Commander Doyle. Dynamo, in turn, served as his bodyguard. Refusing a uniform, Dynamo stuck to his tattered coat with the many pockets, which afforded Venus knives or ice-cooled grape pop as needed.

When the smoke of battle thinned, Joe was pleased to learn that a girl named Mary had sent him a message of appreciation, saying, "I think you are wonderful, Joe, and I hope I see you again some day." Joe smiled.

"Do you figure to see her again?" Dynamo asked, somewhat at a loss to explain the wistful behavior of his best friend.

"It might happen that way," Joe said with a far-away look.

But one quite sad note had to be added to the conclusion of the brief war. It came to Joe in the form of a letter—two letters—and a coat.

"Been meaning to give you these," Dynamo said. "I picked them up the day Mouse and I rode up into Iron Man Number Three."

Number Three, Joe recalled, had all but obliterated the best spaceports and then had mysteriously stopped, frozen into immobility in the act of destroying.

"It was Lanny we found in Number Three," Dynamo said. "We found him there dead.... You wouldn't have wanted to see him. You won't see him now because his body was lost in the first wave of attacks—"

"Lanny? My brother Lanny?"

"You thought he was dead before. Maybe I shouldn't have told you otherwise. But I figure, from the way I found him in the brain of Number Three, that he took his own life to stop the killing of others. He had got ahold of your coat, somehow, and these two letters were in the pocket."

JOE SKIMMED through the first letter. It was the message that had been handed to him during that first bad hour on the witness stand. He had pocketed it, but never had a chance to open it.

It was Lanny's handwriting, scrawled in great haste. "... I'm sure they'll knock out my ship to screen this kidnapping.... They're going to use me for their attack somehow. I'm helpless...we're pausing at a space station. Just a break that I may get a chance to send this... To let you know I've been kidnapped..."

The second letter had been written while Lanny was a prisoner within the brain of Number Three.

"... I can't understand, Joe, how your coat happened to fly into this place.... Don't you open your mail? Maybe they've got you, too...."

And the letter went on to describe Lanny's being forced into one of the parts of the Iron Man before it slid into the sea; and how, later, he thought he had found an escape into daylight, only to discover that he was now trapped within a ball of light, where the view came to him.

At the last, he was agonized and helpless. Somehow his will was being twisted into destruction. Every prayer he breathed increased the vigor of the

(Concluded on page 110)

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LUNAR LEGACY

By Charles Recour

Somewhere on the Moon there was a source of radioactives that meant the greatest fortune in the solar system—if it could be reached!

"YOUR papers, sir?" the guard asked politely. Quickly he skimmed through them. "Everything's in order. Your luggage has been inspected. Your room is number seven, sir." The guard was feeling conversational. "Is this your first trip, sir?"

A smile crossed young Dr. Ran Stevens' face. He shrugged good-humoredly.

"You might call it that," he said, "although I did take a guided tour when I was still at school, about seven years ago."

"You'll find things changed, sir," the guard volunteered. "Old Luna is really civilized now. Why, I—"

"Excuse me," Ran broke in, "but I've got some things to attend to." He

Ran Stevens launched his body forward in a desperate leap to prevent the firing of the gun

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turned and walked up the ramp, leaving the discomfited guard to try his reminiscences on someone else.

As Ran walked up the ramp leading to the cavernous opening in the side of the rocket, he thought of the casualness of the whole thing. And yet for him, this was a thrill. Immersed in laboratory and surrounded by mountains of books, the young physicist had had little time to devote to anything but his chosen work.

All around him, the great activity of a space port was at its height. Rockets were being loaded, both with passengers and freight, and while the Moon was still the only regular objective, Ran could see large craft on the periphery of the field. Without a doubt these were the Martian jobs. Probably, in a few years trips to the planets would be as common as Lunar journeys were now. The one practical thing Ran knew about was the vast development work on rocket motors. He had, in fact, something to do with that work itself. Before long, he knew that the liquid-fuel, chemical rocket would be as obsolete as the dodo. Some more work with the basic atomic engines and all Space would be Man's.

Mart Stevens! As Ran entered the exit-port of the Lunar rocket, he could see his broad-shouldered, handsome father's face grinning down at him. He could hear his voice as he spoke to Ran and his mother before he had made the last trip. That was twelve years ago.

"Son," he had said, "in case anything happens, I still want you to go to school. I want you to be a slide-rule pusher, not a rocket-jockey like I am."

Ran's mother broke in quickly to change the course of the conversation, but Ran remembered the gloomy night when his Dad must have known that he wasn't coming back. Ran wasn't too shocked when the Government message was received, but he knew that was what had killed his mother. Grief and heartbreak were too much for her. Fortunately the insurance and personal property of his father had been more than enough to see him through school.

Ran entered the rocket, found his small cabin and sat on the edge of the acceleration-bed. He pulled the radiogram from his pocket and read it for the thousandth time. "Dear Dr. Stevens," it began, "we have the honor to inform you that we are the custodians of your late father's delayed will—of extreme interest and importance to you. It was his desire that you call for it and discuss it with us personally. He has provided for passage. Signed—Bradley and Lessing, Attorneys-at-Law."

And so Ran found himself headed for the Moon. As anxious as he had been to start work immediately upon obtaining his doctorate, he knew he could not disregard this last request of his father.

ABRUPTLY Ran's chain of thought was broken. The cabin door opened and through it, stepped a girl. For a moment Ran was nonplussed. She was beautiful, her blond hair setting off a lovely piquant face, her abbreviated costume of shorts and tight-fitting jacket lending further clarity to her charms.

She saw Ran. Then her eyes found the room number on the half-open door.

"I beg your pardon," she apologized in a sweet, low and well-modulated voice. "I thought this was number Eight."

"Perfectly all right, Miss," Ran said arising. "My name's Ran Stevens. Hadn't any idea that beautiful girls liked the Luna-trip." He smiled.

The girl laughed. "This is no novelty for me. I work in Luna City. It's

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a rather prosaic job—and life." She glanced down at her watch. "The warning'll come soon. I should get to my cabin. Excuse me again." She turned to leave.

"Don't think about it," Ran said, "Miss—"

"My name's June Crary," she supplied as she went out.

Not bad! Not bad at all, Ran thought, I'll have to get to know her a lot better. His masculine impulses weren't completely smothered under the blanket of scholarship.

In a few moments, the warning buzzer sounded, the inspectors passed through, and a little while later Ran felt the shudder of the rocket as it stood on its jets. In a moment the hand of acceleration tightened, to last for a brief while. Thereafter, until the landing, some ten hours later, the passengers would have the freedom of the vessel.

Ran looked for the girl but she remained confined to her cabin. Ran spent the trip staring through the ports of the rocket and marveling at the thrilling sight and feel of being space-borne. The landing was uneventful. Ran thought: if it's routine now, imagine what it'll be when good atomic engines are available instead of liquid-fueled rockets!

He watched the space-suited ground crewmen attach the flexible tunnel to the lock. On the surface of the Moon very little was to be seen. Lunar City was completely underground. It would have been impossible to build such a large structure as a city above ground and still keep it airtight. Only visible were other rocket craft, a few sheds, radio towers and antennas, and a few space-suited technicians whose duty it was to supervise the landing and take-off of the rockets.

Ran and the other passengers were guided through the flexible tunnel to the reception buildings beneath the crater's surface. He kept his eye on June Crary but had no opportunity to talk with her. For a while he forgot about her in his astonishment at the changes that had taken place since he had last been here as a boy.

LUNA CITY was a world carved in solid rock. The center of the city was a vast cavity filled with conventional structures much like any city on Earth. Living quarters surrounded this area which was filled with places of business, shops, amusement places and all the distractions of any large city; the only difference was that they were piled on each other in complete confusion.

Ran had to smile to himself when he considered how like a typical frontier city this was. And this was the frontier—the frontier of interplanetary space. The milling crowds around him were from every walk of life. The space-suited miner rubbed elbows with the polished administrator. The girls of joy mingled with the girls who earned their living more conventionally. It was a strange and fascinating tableau and Ran felt a surge of enthusiasm and desire for life that he hadn't felt for years.

After locating suitable quarters in one of the numerous hotels, he decided that he would waste no time in seeking out the firm of Bradley and Lessing.

Physically the air around him had a peculiar flatness, not unpleasant but sharp and winey. This came from the air-revitalizers. Both chemical and biological plant-forms were used to renew the stale air. The very little that escaped through leakage and through the air-locks was replenished by rocket-freighter loads of liquid oxygen.

In the center of the city, Ran

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grabbed an air shuttle, a small helicopter just like on an Earth-city, to his destination.

He entered the offices of Bradley and Lessing. They were not particularly pretentious, because like all establishments on the Moon, utility, not appearance was the primary objective.

He opened the door and walked in. The sight that greeted him made him smile happily. The girl whom he had met on the rocket was calmly sitting at a reception desk in the outer office. She looked up. Surprise crossed her features.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Ran smiled. "I didn't know you worked here."

"I simply didn't connect Dr. Ran Stevens with our client," June said. "I'll announce you right away."

"No," Ran said, "not until you promise to have dinner with me tonight."

She hesitated, then nodded. "All right, I will. I need a little relaxation after my vacation on Earth. Like all vacationers, I relaxed too heartily." She scribbled her address on a sheet of paper and then ushered him into the inner office.

Ran found himself facing a pleasant-faced, middle-aged man.

"Good to see you Doctor," the man boomed. "Come right in. Lessing is out, but I can explain why you're here." He offered Ran a drink immediately. When they were both seated comfortably, Ran drawing on a cigarette, the senior partner of Bradley and Lessing, began to explain.

"Naturally," he said, "you're curious to find out what your late father's will contained, and you're still more curious to know why we had to drag you to Luna City to explain it. Mart Stevens had absolute faith in us and entrusted his business affairs to our house. And I think, Doctor, that you can trust us as well. When I tell you the story, you'll understand why I say that.

"Shortly before your father made his last trip *Outside,* he came to us with a rather bizarre story but one which we believe implicitly. The essence of it is that he made a huge strike in natural radioactives, the value of which he dared not even guess at. He did not dare to file a claim for the simple reason that it would have been jumped long before you were in a position to do anything about it. He gave us the location of this claim for safe-keeping—to be given to you now. That's why you're here."

RAN sat silent for a while while the thought percolated through his mind. What Bradley was saying was that he was vastly and independently wealthy contingent only upon his relocating his father's deposit of radioactives.

"There are two courses left for you. You can hire men to locate the deposits according to your father's coded information—" here Bradley tapped an envelope he was toying with against the desk, "—in which case, you'll have a time locating trustworthy agents. Or you can do the job yourself. That is, you locate the deposit. Radio-in a fix, we'll file it, form a company and work it for you. Use your judgment. I think you can trust us in this matter purely in light of the fact that we have kept faith with both you and your father. What do you say?"

Ran's head was spinning. "Frankly," he said, "I'm taken aback by all this. I'm a physicist, not a prospector. But when I think of what the money would enable me to do in the way of a laboratory, there's only one thing I can say."

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"I thought you'd feel that way," Bradley said.

"We'll make arrangements," he went on, "to provide you with equipment and a partner who knows Outside work. Two of you should easily be able to locate the claim and verify it with Geiger-Mueller's. But you'll have to be careful. Trust no one outside of your partner. Luna City, like any outpost is filled with the dregs of humanity, scum who'd cut your throat for a plugged credit. Now examine this coded document at your leisure." Bradley handed it to Ran. "Come back in two days, and you'll be set to go. We'll make every provision. You keep in constant touch with us through phone contacts."

Ran took the paper to his hotel and studied it carefully. It gave clear and explicit directions for finding the claim. And it looked like a very simple job. Ran could see now why the paper was dangerous. It was simply coded and anyone could utilize it.

That night he had dinner with June. He took her into his full confidence, convinced of her honesty. She expressed great interest in the project and wished him the greatest luck. All the while he noticed there was a vague smile on her lips as he described the possible dangers of the Outside trip.

The two of them had a delightful evening and eventually Ran deposited June at her small apartment. He returned to his hotel. Whistling happily, for he sensed something more than a casual interest in June, he opened the door to his room and walked in, flicking the light-switch on as he entered.

In the brief instant that he saw, before the blackness of a blow overwhelmed him, he caught a glimpse of an evil bearded face. That instantaneous sight was all he remembered for a half hour.

RAN came to groggily. His head ached and the brilliant light hurt his eyes. He looked around the room. It was a shambles. It had been searched from top to bottom. Ran saw his disarranged clothing. In alarm he felt for the coded paper. It was gone!

Ran made a mad dash for the phone. Quickly he located Bradley at home and told the story.

"My God, man," Bradley shouted. "There's no time to lose. Get dressed and come to this address to once. Your trip starts now. Fortunately we've got most of the stuff at hand. Hurry man, hurry!"

Ran showered, shaved, and cleared his head with a stiff shot of serinol. Hastily he dressed and headed for the place Bradley had named.

The helicopter set him in an industrial section of the city near the retaining walls. Ran could see the metal bulk of an Outside Valve looming in the artificial darkness.

Bradley was waiting for him, along with several men, and a space-suited figure, behind the darkened bubble helmet of which Ran could not distinguish his partner's features.

"Listen," Bradley commanded. "On the Field, is a rocket, a small but efficient job, which your partner will handle. You'll take care of the locating through optical navigation as your father's coded chart implied. Give directions. You'll get there, but move fast. All the necessary equipment has been provided. Immediately upon locating the strike, radio us. Give us an exact fix, carry on an elementary survey and we'll legalize the thing. You have to beat who ever got the paper. I think it'll take them a while to solve the code. So the faster you hurry the better off you'll be. I've supplied arms, a few rifles and pistols, but I hope you don't have to use them."

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Ran climbed into the space suit, took a few last minute instructions and headed for the air lock. In a minute he and his partner were through it and the broad panorama of the Lunar City rocket field lay before them. They were whisked out to a waiting rocket, a small, compact little vessel, not large enough for spacial work, but good enough for the short distances on the surface of the Moon. Quickly they got inside, and before Ran could say anything, his partner was at the control board.

With a jerk the rocket was spaceborne. Only then, did Ran's accomplice say anything.

"Whew," a feminine voice said through the muffled headphones, "I'm glad that's done."

Ran looked, startled. "What the devil . . ."

"Yes," a girl's voice laughed, "it's me. Miss June Crary at your service. Don't look so shocked, Doctor; I'm a registered pilot. It's a sort of hobby."

"Why didn't they tell me?"

"They probably thought you wouldn't like the idea. But rest assured, Dr. Stevens, I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, especially on a Lunar landscape. Really, you'd be surprised how much I know about it."

"I believe you," Ran said somewhat reluctantly. Then more cheerily, "Oh well, you can't know less about it than I do."

"Don't say that, Doc—"

"Call me 'Ran,'" Ran said.

"All right, Ran, don't say that. Remember you're supposed to tell me where to go."

Ran described the general region to her, almost exactly as it had been down on the paper. "When we reach the area of the broken Peak," he said, "I'll be able to take shots and get our bearings. It shouldn't be hard to locate from that. And the Geiger-Mueller's will give it to us exactly."

"Just don't get too far off, Ran," June said, "I don't like the idea of being out of the ship and walking around any more than's necessary."

RAN watched the cold and dead Lunar landscape spin away beneath them and at another time he might have been impressed. But not at that moment.

The ship, under the girl's hands, skimmed the Lunar surface at a height of a few hundred meters.

Ran took stock of the ship and was surprised to find it outfitted comfortably in spite of its small size. He particularly noted the automatic rifles and pistols conveniently racked on the rear bulkhead.

"Don't get out of the suit any more than's necessary," June warned. "You can never tell when something's likely to happen. And we only have another hour to go at this rate."

"They're not the most comfortable things on Earth—I mean, the Moon—but they're not so bad at that," Ran submitted.

"Men have lived in them for days at a time," June said, "and thanked God they had them."

"Look!" Ran cried suddenly sometime later. "There's the broken Peak!"

June followed his pointing finger. Sure enough, just on the horizon, the queer rock formation, looking like a broken shaft, lay revealed to their gaze. Ran watched the girl's fingertips play over the controls of the craft. Skillfully and without effort she brought the vessel in a sweeping curve, a pass right over the weird rock formation.

"There's no doubt about it," Ran said, "that's it."

Manipulating the controls, June whipped the little rocket into a neat

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glide, fed power to the underjets and set it down neatly.

Selecting equipment, including the guns as well as the transits, Ran and June quickly dashed through the air-lock. Laboriously stumbling over the soft pumice ground, Ran selected a site at which to set up his transit. It was the work of few moments. Then taking readings in relation to a cleft in the broken peak rock formation, he soon had arranged their course.

"All we have to do now, June," he confided to the girl, "is to walk about three hundred meters along the line I've plotted. You walk first. I'll tell you when to stop. Then I'll follow."

June did that. Ran came along immediately, set up the transit and took a new shot.

"All right, June. We walk forty more meters straight ahead along this new line. That's the strike site. At least it should be!"

Again they followed the new line. As yet there was no sight of anyone.

"We're going to beat them, whoever it was," Ran said. "In a few minutes I think we can call Bradley."

RAN prodded the pumice at their feet. "Here is where it should be," he said in a puzzled tone. "I don't think I've made a mistake. Yet it looks exactly like the rest of the terrain."

"What about the Geiger-Mueller's?" June asked.

"The coded note said they wouldn't be any good until we got into the strike itself. There must be lead shielding around."

June stepped a little to the front and side of Ran. Suddenly she gave a little cry.

"I'm sinking, Ran! I'm sinking!" Ran turned to her. The pumice-like ground was crumpling like sugar at her feet. Suddenly it gave completely and with a scream, she vanished from sight, evading Ran's clutching fingers.

Even as he peered into the hole through which June had vanished, he retained presence of mind to call Bradley.

"Bradley, this is Stevens," he said as he selected the right frequency.

"Come in, Stevens," came the answering call.

"We've found the site." Ran rattled off the coordinates of their position. Rapidly he explained what had happened to June. "I'm going down after her. Send police at once, Bradley. I'm afraid that the gang will spot our craft."

Even as Ran sent out the call, his heart sank again, for a second reason. Not far overhead a rocket was circling, considerably larger than the one he and June had used. Well, he thought grimly, they were too late.

He called down to June. There was no answer.

Even with the aid of his light, he could see nothing. The rocket above was preparing to land. He had to get out in a hurry. As he thought, the decision was taken out of his hands. The pumice crumpled further and Ran shot downward.

It was a short fall. Ran felt the breath knocked out of him as he landed but otherwise he was unhurt. "June! June!" he called. Then he saw her. As she fell her helmet must have struck a projecting rock with considerable force. He gathered her unconscious form in his arms, and her eyes started to open.

He saw that her transender pack was a smashed wreck. He placed his helmet against hers, and through simple sound conduction he was able to ask her: "Are you all right, June?" She smiled weakly. "I think so. Wait'll I get up."

Gingerly she managed to stand erect. When he was assured that she was all

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right, Ran told her what he had done and what he had seen.

"They'll be on us in a matter of minutes, June. I don't know what their angle is, but they're here. They know the police are coming. They must have picked up my call."

"I think it's pretty simple, Ran," June said. "They'll put a probe to your nervous system and force you to sign over the mine legally. Then they'll block your cortex and you'll never know about this."

"They might try a thing like that—I hadn't thought of it. And to make it worse they've got the original documents."

Ran looked wildly about. Several tunnel openings radiated out to either side of them.

"Quick," he said, shining his light into the cavernous mouth of one. "Let's try and get as far away as we can, before we have to use gunfire."

HOLDING June's hand and carrying a rifle in the other, Ran led the way into one of the radiating tunnels. He could see his portable Geiger-Mueller winking rapidly under the influence of radiation. This mine must be rich in ore! They'd have to be careful not to get an overdose of radiation poisoning.

The light disclosed a simple circular shaft as they walked along, smooth-walled and obviously artificial. Ran noticed that it curved slightly. After walking ten minutes, he stopped and put his helmet against June's.

"I think it's safe to douse the light now. I have a suspicion that they might not be above shooting."

"They'll have a time finding us," June said. "They don't know what tunnel we took."

"No?" Ran said grimly. "We leave nice footprints in this dust."

He could feel June tremble slightly against him. Then he heard a faint crackling in his earphones. He stiffened. June sensed that he was receiving. Evidently they were holding down the power of their transmitter to a minimum.

"Listen, Stevens. We've got you now. We know what tunnel you're in. Meet us and talk sensible business or you'll never walk out of here alive." The voice was slurred and indistinguishable.

"Who are you—and what do you want?" Ran asked calmly.

"Sign over the mine to me—and never mind who I am. Be quick about coming out. Remember the tunnels dead-end themselves. You don't stand a chance."

Ran could catch the barest sight of light just around the curvature of the tunnel. He raised the rifle and squeezed off a shot in that direction. There was a curse over the phone but he doubted whether he had hit anything.

He turned to June. He saw her ten feet in front. Anxiously she beckoned. Ran dashed over. June pointed excitedly to another hole smaller than the tunnel. It was not a dead-end!

"We'll catch them in the rear," he said, "let's go."

They squeezed through the opening and after about twenty meters they found themselves in a tunnel identical to the one they had left. Without hesitation Ran, carrying his rifle at the ready, went forward. Here too despite a slight curvature of the tunnel a spot of light from the central point was visible. Soon they reached the mouth of the tunnel.

Waiting, they watched. A half-dozen figures, space-suited and unidentifiable, were clustered in a group watching the mouth of their former tunnel. With only the barrel of his rifle and June's protruding, Ran said calmly over the

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phone: "Drop your weapons and raise your hands. I have you covered."

For a moment the startled figures were paralyzed. Then they acted. They whirled in unison, each seeking the source of the menace.

Ran and June fired, fired as fast as they could press the triggers. It was the first time Ran had ever seen punctured space-suits. Any shot was fatal. The six men tumbled in a grotesque heap of crumpled space-suits, their eyes puffed and glazing. Those who hadn't been killed by the actual shots died simply but horribly of—no air at all.

Ran and June stepped out of the tunnel. They looked at the opening above them. It wouldn't be difficult to climb out. Ran ignored the heap of bodies and walked to the side wall which he could climb out of.

Suddenly his earphones came alive.

"Not so fast! Both of you drop your weapons and don't turn around." Slowly Ran and June obeyed, he through direct command, she through imitation.

"Now raise your hands as high as you're able to." Again they obeyed.

"Now turn around slowly, very slowly."

RAN turned and nearly dropped in his tracks. The man facing them was short and stocky. The sun-shields in his glassite helmet disguised most of his head, but one glimpse was enough.

"Bradley!" Ran said, stunned.

"Yes," the man grinned, "it's Bradley. You fools. Who do you think sent you on this searching party? Who do you think ambushed you? For ten years," he went on, bitterness lacing his voice, "I tried to get Lessing to look into this thing—well, he wouldn't, so I had to wait. But it's borne fruit. Thank God that Lessing was gone when you arrived—although I had more to do with it than he. Why I ever tied up with that miserable little coward I'll never know. Do you think I'm crazy enough to let something like this slip through my fingers, Stevens?"

"You had me fooled all right," Ran said. "I never imagined that you were the one. I am surprised you waited for me to dig this spot out. Why didn't you do it long before?"

"Because, you fool," Bradley answered, "Lessing knew—and wouldn't let me."

"Where is he now?"

"Having a leisurely vacation on Earth. He'll be surprised when he gets back and finds out that I won't need him at all any more—the stupid fool!" Malevolence radiated from the space-suited figure.

"I might tell you," Bradley said, never letting his gun waver from them an instant, "that you needn't expect the police."

"Well, exactly what do you want me to do?" Ran asked tensely.

"We'll go back to my ship together. I have papers drawn up which you'll sign. I'll see that you're taken care of generously. But I want this property in my name."

"And supposing I refuse to sign," Ran countered.

"I'll kill you both, preparing a statement that you were murdered by this pack of thugs." Bradley gestured at the fallen bodies. "And you'll have willed the properties to the firm of Bradley and Lessing. Nice, eh?"

"Yes," Ran said, "it looks as if you've got me."

"All right," Bradley sneered, "start climbing out. And don't try to run."

Ran started out of the mine. He had climbed awkwardly only about five feet. Suddenly, in a fantastic leap, he hurled himself from the slanting pitwall to

(*Concluded on page* 111)

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FLIGHT TO DISHONOR

By Gerald Vance

Drake, his heart filled with poisonous hatred, became a traitor to his people. But he forgot that no poison is stronger than its antidote!

THE VENUSIAN water-front was a garish microcosm of human evil. Hard-eyed women slipped through the sense-drugging smoke looking for men—of any sort, in any condition, from any planet. Gamblers, thieves, simpering perverts, sat at tables against the wall, drinking the sickly sweet Venusian *kilaris* and watching the women, watching each other, searching for some sign of human frailty or weakness, searching for someone they might cheat or rob or betray.

Drake sat alone at a corner table. His hand was curved loosely about a glass, a cigarette hung from his thin lips. A tall man with a spare hard body, he watched the crowd with eyes that were bitter and mocking. There was no compassion in his face. He was laughing at these dregs, these human vultures; and he laughed at himself because he was one of them.

Thin reedy music filtered through

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Aware that he was no longer alone, Drake slowly lifted his hands from the chart...

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the room. Occasionally a woman's scream split the air. Or a man's curse crashed against the walls.

A girl emerged from the swirling smoke before Drake's table. An Earth-girl, she smiled at him from a tired pale face and put one hand on her hip. "Hello there," she said. "Do you want company?"

"Not yours," Drake said, glancing at her with impassive eyes.

She shrugged and strolled on.

Drake sipped his drink, wondering why he had rebuffed her so coldly. He had wanted to hurt her, of course. That was the great and wonderful joke. You hated those who were like yourself—that was it.

A scream sounded. A woman cried, "Don't! Stop it! Let me go!"

Drake turned lazily toward the sound which was coming from the adjoining table. The Earth-girl was struggling with a huge Venusian. He held her on his knee and was roaring with laughter as she struggled to escape his embrace.

No one else paid any attention to the scene. It was too common an occurrence to cause more than mild interest.

The noise bothered Drake. He glanced sourly at the struggling pair, hating them both, but hating the Venusian slightly more than the girl. For that reason he acted. He picked up a bottle from his table and slapped it viciously across the Venusian's face. The Venusian leaped to his feet with a snarling cry of rage hissing through his lips, but Drake moved faster and kicked him squarely in the stomach. The Venusian went down to the dirty floor and lay there writhing in pain.

"You were making too much noise," Drake said in a quiet almost courteous voice. "No offense, understand."

He returned to his table, the Venusian picked himself up and limped away and it was over. The music soared up again and the tiny flare-up was lost like an extinguished match on a black and windy night.

The girl stood before Drake's table, slowly rubbing a bruise on her left arm. "Thank you very much," she said.

Drake shrugged and sipped his drink.

The girl hesitated an instant, then sat down at Drake's table with a defiant smile. "Now that you have befriended me, you cannot ignore me. You have made yourself responsible for me. May I have a drink?"

Drake nodded at his bottle and an extra glass on the table. "Go ahead."

"Why are you so bitter? A woman, perhaps?"

"No analysis, please. You can have a drink, but not my life story."

"Why? Is it so sad?"

"We aren't talking about it, remember? If you want to hold someone's hand, give me back my drink and be on your way."

"Oh, all right." The girl drank a glassful of the harsh liquor and sighed gratefully. "That's better."

Drake studied her as she poured another drink. She was about twenty-eight or twenty-nine, he judged, and not bad looking. Her hair was dark and drawn back severely from her thin but well-moulded features, and her eyes were clear and deep blue. She seemed nervous, he thought, in spite of her effort to be casual. What he could see of her figure was quite all right.

"Would you like to come to my apartment?" she asked him a moment later.

"Why?"

"We might talk, have a drink or so, providing you bring along a bottle. It might be pleasant."

"There's always that chance,"

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Drake said dryly. He looked at her and she lowered her eyes. He saw a flush of color moving up from her throat to her cheeks. "We do what we can," she said, looking at the scarred table top. "We must stay alive, although God knows why. Life isn't much fun."

"Don't tell me your sad story either," Drake said. "I am not interested in details of dull lives. Mine included. Nothing is more boring than the maundering account of how badly we've been used. Where is your apartment?"

She mentioned an address, a rather good one. Drake raised his eyebrows at her, but she shrugged and said, "It was a gift from an old friend. He is taking it back next week, I believe."

Drake didn't want to go with her; nor did he want to sit in this reeking cesspool any longer. He chose what seemed the lesser of two evils.

"Very well, let's go," he said. "What's your name?"

"Vanya."

"Undoubtedly an invention, but what's the difference? Come on." He paid his check and they walked out together....

HER APARTMENT was simply and tastefully furnished. It overlooked the harbor where two of Venus' oceans conjoined. A light breeze stirred the beige drapes. Drake sat down and crossed his long legs. The girl asked him to make himself comfortable, pointed out cigarettes on a low table, and then excused herself and left the room. Drake lit a cigarette and smoked idly, watching the smoke curling toward the high ceiling and thinking about nothing at all.

The door Vanya had used in leaving the room opened again, and without looking up, Drake said: "Okay, what's the game?"

A man's voice said, "You are not surprised?"

Drake turned his head and saw two men standing in the doorway. They were Venusians: huge, patient-seeming types, with flaccid jowls and lemon-colored skins.

"Hardly," Drake said. "It was all too pat. Now what the hell do you want?"

"Ah, a direct type. That is fine." The man who spoke had a faint scar on his left cheek and seemed to be in authority. He entered the room and sat down in a chair facing Drake. The second Venusian also took a seat, but on the far side of the room.

"We need your help, Commander Drake. Yes, I know your old title, you see. My name is Arish."

Vanya appeared in the doorway. She didn't meet Drake's eyes. "May I go now?" she said in a low voice.

"Of course, of course," Arish said.

"They made me do it," she said, speaking in a rush. "I hope it doesn't make trouble for you."

"Forget it," Drake said, smiling cynically. "But next time you tell a man to bring his own bottle, be sure to hide the ones in your apartment." He pointed to a cabinet in the corner in which there were half a dozen bottles of liquor. "It might set your chump thinking—as it did me."

Vanya wet her lips and then, turning suddenly, hurried out the front door.

"And now," Drake said to the scar-faced Venusian, "what do you want of me? Obviously you've gone to the trouble of finding out about me, so I'm hoping that your trouble won't be wasted."

"We hope not, Commander Drake. We know that you were in the Space Arm of Earth for many years and that you acquired a brilliant record. We know that you got into difficulty with your commanding officers eight

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years ago and were—ah—dishonorably discharged. Is that correct?"

"Perfectly," Drake said coolly.

"It was for disobedience of orders, we understand. You exceeded your authority in capturing a pirate ship, and were therefore thrown out of the service." Arish smiled sympathetically. "Instead of giving you a medal, they chose to disgrace you. You had enemies in the service who were jealous of your reputation, of course."

"I suspected as much," Drake said dryly.

"Very good. Now we know that at the moment you are without funds of any kind."

"Correct again."

"Thank you. We can remedy that, perhaps. We want you to do a bit of work for us. Nothing very difficult or dangerous. Does that interest you?"

"Of course. What sort of work?"

ARISH PAUSED delicately. "We wish you to prevent an Earth ship from leaving here for Saturn tomorrow night."

"Why?"

"That I cannot tell you. To be frank, I do not know myself. This ship, and certain papers aboard her, are what you might call pawns in a mighty chess game. Earth wishes to move the pawn, we wish to keep it here. That is all I can tell you."

"Okay. What do I do?"

"You accept our proposal?"

"Yes. Does that surprise you?"

"Not actually, but your ready compliance is more than we dared expect. We feared you might have a lingering loyalty for your native planet. Despite how they treated you, we thought that—"

"Let's don't talk about it anymore. Earth is just a ball of cooling iron about forty-six days to my left. I'm a realist. I learned that words like loyalty, idealism, patriotism, are like so many rings of smoke. They blow away in any breeze and cease to exist. They are platitudinous pap to be fed to school children. Now what do I do, and how much can I make?"

"Excellent. The money will be adequate, I'm sure." He mentioned a sum and Drake smiled agreeably. "Now our plan is this: We have a Space Arm uniform, with suitable insignia for your old rank of Commander, in a hotel room not far from here. Wearing that, you will have access to the Earth port here, and once inside, I feel you can devise some means to prevent Space Ship 311 from reaching Saturn on schedule tomorrow night. All we ask is a few hours delay."

"It's not so easy as you make it sound," Drake said.

"We are paying you to be ingenious, Commander Drake."

"Well, I'll take a crack at it."

"Here is the address you will go to now," Arish said, handing him a slip of paper. "Reconnoiter the port tonight, if possible, and then let us know of anything you need."

"How will I get in touch with you?"

"We will keep in touch with you," Arish said, underlining the work 'keep' slightly.

"And when do I get paid?"

"Half now, and the remainder when you can assure us that Space Ship 311 will not reach Saturn on schedule."

"Very well," Drake said, standing. "Let's have it then. I'll collect the rest tomorrow."

"You are confident."

"That's about all I have left," Drake said, and accepted a roll of money from Arish...

A ROOM HAD been reserved for him at the address Arish had given him. He found a Space Arm uniform hanging in the wardrobe, and

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on a shelf beside it there were the flaring golden wings that denoted a Commander's rank. Drake looked at them for a moment, a musing smile on his lips, then undressed quickly and went into the shower. He resolutely kept himself from thinking of anything at all as he soaped his lean muscular body and rinsed himself under a stinging spray of cold water. After that he dressed, slipping into the uniform with an ease that came from long practice. He buttoned the twin rows of gold buttons on the tunic, his fingers working automatically, and buckled the heavy leather belt about his flat waist, and pinned the flaring wings to his sleeves. Slinging the short black cape over one shoulder and putting the visored cap on his head, he left his room and went quickly down the single flight of stairs to the lobby.

The girl was sitting there in a straight chair. She came quickly to her feet when she saw him and walked to him with short hesitant steps. Drake stopped and looked down into her pale, anxious face. She looked frightened, he thought.

"They made me do it," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"You said that before, in your rooms," Drake said.

"They have my brother in custody. They threatened to give him drugs while he was unconscious, make him an addict. They said they would mutilate him unless I helped them."

"Well, you have saved him from that harrowing fate," Drake said. "You should be happy."

"I haven't got you into trouble, have I?"

Drake laughed shortly. "Don't worry about me—" He paused, trying to remember her name. "It's Vanya, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't worry about me, Vanya. Good-by." He nodded to her and walked out of the cheap hotel into the swarming streets of Venus...

AT THE Space Port, a grimly efficient cadet was checking the papers of all entering the port. Drake stood off to one side of the huge gates, gazing up at the dark sky as if he were checking the weather. He was the picture of soldierly composure as he stood there—smoking a cigarette and looking up at the heavens with a casually interested expression—but his mind was very active. He had to get into the port, but he had no papers, and this grim cadet looked just the type to enforce his regulations on everyone, regardless of rank.

The cadet was being very severe at the moment with two Venusian laborers. Their passes weren't dated properly and he told them with finality that they would have to go to the processing office and get them fixed before they could enter the port. They protested that they would lose a night's work, and they said, crowding close to the cadet in their concern, that he knew them well, had seen them every night for months, and couldn't he let them get their passes straightened out at their lunch hour, or tomorrow?

The cadet said no, finally and emphatically, and they tromped off, mournful and disconsolate.

Drake flipped his cigarette away and approached the cadet.

"Your name, please?"

"Nelson, sir. Cadet Second Class, Jonathan Nelson." The cadet came to attention, saluted stiffly, and fixed his eyes on a point about three inches to the right of Drake's shoulder.

"At ease, young man," Drake said, smiling. "I only wanted to congratulate you on the way you handled that situation. You're doing your job well. What's your Commander's

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name?"

"Commander Bailey, sir." The cadet was still at rigid attention, but couldn't control the flush of happiness that had mounted to his cheeks.

"I'll mention this to him," Drake said. "Carry on."

With that Drake strolled casually into the Space Port, while the young cadet let out his breath happily and began composing the letter he would write to his fiancee on Earth the instant he got off duty.

Drake asked a passing workman for the location of Space Ship 311, and learned that it was at the northeastern end of the field. He walked in that direction, his step springy, his eyes straight ahead, and returned salutes with a sharpness that caused several cadets to stop after he had passed and stare in admiration at his rigid, retreating back.

The 311 was on the ground beside its mooring tower, to which it would be hoisted the following morning. Now, bathed in searchlights, it was two hundred feet of slim shining beauty. Workmen were making the last preparations and adjustments under the supervision of lieutenants. Drake walked briskly up the companionway, and returned the salute of the cadet who stood at the doorway of the ship.

"Is the commander on board?" he asked.

"No, sir. He left two hours ago."

"Very well, I'll go aboard. I'm from the Admiral-Inspector's office."

"Very good, sir."

FOR THE first time in eight years Drake stepped into a military ship of the Earth fleet. He paused a moment as memories came back to him, memories of his first flight as a cadet, memories of his first command, and the joy of driving through the void, master of the destiny of every man on board. He remembered the clean harmonious discipline of his ships, the will and spirit that his men displayed in reaction to his fairness and competence. There were other things, too: the panoramic view of asteroids, comets and star fragments racing toward the visi-screen, and being deflected, miraculously it seemed, by the ship's far-flung gravitational fields; the thrill of spotting a pirate ship thousands of miles off in the void, and the even greater thrill as the rockets of his ship pounded into the chase. And still other things: The coffee alone in his cabin after a gruelling night, the commendations that came occasionally from his superiors, and finally the settling to Earth with the feeling of a job well done.

Well, that was over, long over, Drake thought with sudden bitterness. He glanced ahead, down the clean shining corridor, and squared his shoulders. Now he was going to add something to those memories of his career in the Earth Space Arm. Something not quite so pretty, he thought, but a damn sight more remunerative.

He strode along the corridor of the main deck, passing an occasional surprised cadet or lieutenant, until he came to the forward control room. An idea had come to him in the instant he had paused inside the ship—an idea that would earn him the rest of the Venusian's payment. Rapping on the door of the control room once, he pushed it open and stepped inside. The control room was small, about twenty feet square, and here were the precision instruments and charts that guided a ship through the maze of the void. A flustered cadet sprang from a chair and saluted hastily.

"Sorry sir, I just sat down to tie my shoe."

Drake smiled briefly. "A very sensible thing to do. You're on duty here, I presume. Your name?"

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"Merriweather, sir."

The cadet was about twenty, fair-skinned and blond, with light blue eyes and earnest, healthy features. He was deadly serious, and probably not too intelligent, Drake judged. And that was fine.

He glanced about with seeming casualness, but his eyes stopped for a second on the master-chart which outlined the course for the 311's flight. It was set for Saturn, the computing arms locked in place. The arms, like the prongs of a huge compass, triangulated Saturn, Mars, and a dense asteroid cluster about twenty points off Saturn. These were the points on which the 311's course was based. The officer in charge at the blast-off would supply the measurements and figures now on the chart to the pilot, and he would set his course accordingly. A one mill error in the placement of a computing arm would send the 311 hundreds of thousands of miles out of its way. It would cause a delay of six, possibly eight hours. And that was enough. Drake turned to the cadet with the air of a man who had just made a decision.

"Please be good enough to tell your commander that I wish to see him."

The cadet swallowed. "I'm on duty here, sir. My orders are not to leave this room until I am relieved."

"You are hereby relieved then," Drake said.

"The commander isn't aboard, sir."

"I did not ask for any information. I asked you to go to his quarters and tell him I am here and wish to see him."

"Very well, sir."

THE CADET departed, rather hesitantly, Drake noted. He might not be unintelligent after all. When the door clicked shut, Drake stepped quickly to the master chart and turned the set screw that locked the computing arm in place. As the arm swung free, he moved it in a two mill arc, set it down, and twisted the set screw tight. As he did so, he heard a click behind him. He didn't straighten up; he remained bending over the chart, appearing to study it, but his mind was moving swiftly, carefully. Had the cadet seen him change the position of the computing arm?

"The commander isn't in his quarters, sir. The mate informs me he left the ship two hours ago."

"Oh, very well then," Drake said, turning casually from the chart. "I'll see him later."

"Sir—" The cadet swallowed, halted, and his cheeks were bright with tension.

"Yes?"

"My orders are to see that no one touches anything in this room."

"Those are the usual orders, I believe."

"Sir, you touched that computing arm."

Drake met the cadet's eyes squarely. He firmed his jaw and let his eyes reflect an anger he didn't feel. For perhaps thirty seconds he stared at the cadet, watching him twist and melt under his gaze.

"I might be mistaken," Drake said at last, in a deliberate, icy voice, "but I think you said I touched this computing arm. Is that what you said?"

"Yes, sir. I thought I saw you touch it as I entered."

"You *thought!* What was your rating on your last eye examination?"

The cadet swallowed. "Nine, sir. It should have been eleven, but I had been ill—"

"Please answer my questions. I don't want case histories. Now, Cadet Merriweather, I realize that you are understandably excited about your present responsibilities. That does you credit. However, considering your eye

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rating, and the fact that you *think* you saw something instead of being sure of it, I feel that your present lack of control can be attributed to factors other than a too-intense devotion to duty. Do you think I have a point?"

"I don't know, sir," the cadet said, swallowing hard.

Drake felt he had pressed the youngster far enough. He smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about it. I'd hate to tell you how I felt my first night as deck officer on a Space Ship. It's a rough sensation."

"I know, sir."

"You'll get used to it," Drake said, smiling easily. "Carry on."

The cadet wet his lips and seemed on the verge of saying more, but Drake brought his arm up in salute, and the cadet did likewise, hurriedly, and whatever he was going to say never passed his lips. Drake walked out the door, and five minutes later was riding in a car to his hotel....

AS HE opened the door of his room he smelled thick Venusian cigar smoke. He wasn't surprised to see the Venusian, Arish, sitting in a deep chair, his plump legs crossed comfortably.

"Watching your investment, eh?" Drake said, tossing his hat and cape on the bed.

"Of course," Arish said, fingering the scar on his cheek. "What have you accomplished?"

"It's all set," Drake said. "I changed the position of a computing arm on the master chart. The mistake will take 311 at least eight hours off its course. Satisfied?"

"Perfectly. And you?"

"I feel fine. Just fine. I'll feel better with a quart of your stinking liquor in me, but I still feel pretty good."

"Excellent." Arish stood slowly and took a flat sheaf of bills from his breast pocket. "True to our agreement, here is the balance of your payment."

"Put it on the bed. No, I have to sleep there. Put it on the floor. I feel fine, but not fine enough to touch that money yet."

"I thought your scruples had been put away with your childhood toys," Arish said, smiling; but his tiny eyes were watching Drake carefully.

"I thought so too," Drake said. "Now would you please do me the great favor of getting the hell out of here?"

"But of course," Arish said. But as he went out the door his eyes were very thoughtful.

Drake got drunk that night. He slept fitfully, and awoke with a pounding head and a furry tongue. He lay in bed, smoking a cigarette that tasted foul, and wondered, without any real curiosity, what was going to happen to him. For he knew he had taken a step that would lead him into a different way of life. Now he was a traitor—and that did something to a man. Drake had not been particularly honest or upright in the eight years he had been out of the service. He had run contraband, fought in some dubious pirate battles, operated a couple of fly-by-night space lines. But that was larceny, not treason. He had taken the last downward step; he was as low as he could get. There was no redemption left to him. Despite his callousness, his bitterness, his rage at Earth, he felt sick and weary.

He showered, shaved, and got into the uniform again, almost unconsciously. He had sailed under false colors, so there was no reason to change them now.

DOWNSTAIRS he debated what he should do. Breakfast seemed like

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a horrible idea, but it would kill time. And after that, what? Drake didn't know.

He went out into the murky misty sunlight and turned to the right. He hadn't taken ten steps before a voice —a loud, surprised voice—called his name.

Drake turned, feeling suddenly vulnerable and naked. An officer attired in a Space Arm uniform—a captain —was hurrying toward him, hand outstretched, a smile on his dark narrow face.

"Drake, this is a pleasant miracle," the man said.

Drake took his hand automatically. "I'm afraid I don't remember you," he said.

"Well, there's no reason why you should," the captain said cheerfully. He was not as tall as Drake, and his body was slim and well-conditioned. His eyes were brown and direct, and his hair was black with wings of gray at the temples. "I'm Captain Riley, Stan Riley; but when I met you I was a cadet, assigned to your ship, the *Sun King*."

Drake had a vague memory of a Cadet Riley, an alert intelligent boy with good stuff in him. But the memory was very vague.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" Captain Riley asked. "Are you with the fleet or have they got you behind a desk?"

Drake couldn't believe that Riley didn't know he had been cashiered, dishonorably discharged from the service. Still, he reflected, it was possible; there were thousands of officers in the Fleet and it was possible to lose track of even your friends. Obviously, Riley didn't know about Drake's disgrace.

They had fallen into step now, walking slowly along the crowded sidewalk. "I'm not with the Fleet anymore," Drake said, answering Riley's question. "I do a little bit of everything now."

"Nothing you can talk about, eh?"

Drake smiled with unconscious bitterness. "No, I'd rather not talk about what I'm doing now."

Riley was off duty, and asked if he might join Drake for breakfast. There was no logical reason to say no, Drake realized, and so he said yes. But he found that he enjoyed Riley's company. They didn't talk about the Fleet, but Riley was amusing, enthusiastic and undemanding as a conversationalist. Afterward, he said he had some business to attend to, but asked if he might see Drake for a farewell drink that evening.

"All right," Drake said. "Supposing you stop by my hotel. But why do you say a farewell drink?"

"I'm leaving for Saturn tonight," Riley said. "On the 311."

He shook hands with Drake quickly and firmly, and walked away and was soon lost in the crowded street. Drake rubbed his forehead tiredly and walked back to his hotel.

RILEY ARRIVED at Drake's room about six o'clock with a bottle under his arm. He found glasses and poured each of them a drink.

"To the Fleet," he said, and Drake echoed, "To the Fleet!"

They sat down, glasses in hand and Riley stretched his legs out comfortably. "This is the life," he said.

"Yes, indeed." Drake wished Riley would finish his drink and clear out. He found the deception unbearable, and inside he was gnawed with guilt.

"What's your mission at Saturn?" he asked.

Riley shrugged. "Nobody knows. The rumor is we're delivering some papers to our people there. Information they need in a hurry to discuss disarmament proposals at the Interplanetary Conference. Something like

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that, at any rate. Why?"

"Just curious," Drake said. The information wouldn't get there in time, of course. Earth's representatives would be at a temporary disadvantage. It didn't seem terribly important; but Drake knew that such apparent trivia often had far-reaching effects on overall decisions and strategy.

THERE WAS a hesitant knock on the door, and Riley glanced at Drake. "Expecting company? I can clear out any time."

"No, I'm not expecting anyone," Drake said. He went to the door, opened it and saw Cadet Merriweather, the youngster who had been on duty in the control room of the 311. The young man looked nervous and frightened; but his jaw was set in hard tight lines.

"I wish to talk to you, sir," he said.

"Come in."

Cadet Merriweather removed his hat and entered the room. He blinked when he saw Riley. He saluted quickly and what was left of his confidence seemed to drain away. "I didn't know you were here, sir," he said.

"Well, why should you?" Riley said in a good-humored voice. "You're not paid to know my whereabouts."

"I came to talk with the Commander," Cadet Merriweather said in a shaky, over-loud voice.

"Do you mean in private?"

"No, sir. Not exactly, sir."

"Well, speak up, man," Drake said.

Cadet Merriweather swallowed painfully. "You moved a computing arm on the master chart of the 311 yesterday. I saw you do it, but I was too confused to report it. But I did order a crewman to follow you, and he reported that you were staying at this hotel. I haven't slept since then, worrying about what to do. But I've made up my mind now. I may be wrong, sir, but I've got to do my duty."

"What is it you've got to do?" Drake said casually.

"You are under arrest, sir," Cadet Merriweather said, and drew a rocket gun from the holster at his waist. He pointed it squarely at Drake's stomach. "I'm going to take you to the ship commander and tell him what I saw you do. After that the matter will be in his hands. Please be good enough to take your hat and cape and come with me."

Captain Riley stood up quickly, an astonished look on his face. He looked at Drake, then at the cadet, and gave a short laugh. "This is the silliest thing I ever heard. Do you realize what you're doing, Cadet?"

"I realize, sir," the cadet said.

Drake was conscious of nothing but relief. It flowed through him warmly, wonderfully. He had been caught, and the damage would now be rectified. He didn't care what happened to him—but he knew that he still cared what happened to Earth. He felt grateful to Cadet Merriweather.

"The cadet is right, Riley," he said in a quiet voice. "I did move a computing arm on the master chart yesterday. I was paid to do it."

Riley stared at him in amazement. "You can't be serious, Drake."

"I'm serious, all right," Drake said. The feeling of relief was growing, spreading through him with a sensation that was nearly joyful. "Don't look so tragic. No harm will be done. Report the whole sorry business to the 311's commander, reset your course, and that's all there is to it."

Riley's lean dark face was grave now. He nodded to the cadet, and said, "You've done a good job. Let me have that gun, please. I'll take over."

CADET MERRIWEATHER handed him his gun with a relieved sigh. "I'm glad it's all right," he said,

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and rubbed his perspiring forehead.

"Yes, it's all right," Riley said, and as he spoke he raised the gun and sent a blast of soundless, smoking heat through the cadet's heart. Merriweather went to his knees, choking with pain, his eyes anguished and disbelieving. "No, no," he gasped, and then crashed forward on his face. In another three seconds he was dead.

Riley turned languidly to Drake. He was smiling slightly, but his eyes were sharp and careful. "I'm also working for Arish, Drake," he said, quietly. "Lucky thing, eh?"

Drake tensed, but relaxed as he saw the point of Riley's gun swing casually about and point squarely at his stomach.

"I don't get it," he said. His throat was dry and he had difficulty speaking.

"They figured two men would do the job better than one. Also, Arish got the idea last night that you were developing qualms of conscience. So he asked me to get in touch with you and see that you remained properly realistic about this business."

"Why did you sell out?"

"And Arish was right. He usually is, of course. You would have thrown the whole deal into the fire because of this stupid cadet."

"Why did you sell out?"

Riley made an impatient gesture. "We're grown men, Drake. Don't ask foolish questions. I liked Venusian money. It comes in larger rolls than that of Earth. That's all."

"You had no reason to," Drake said. "You have no reason to sell out Earth. It doesn't make sense."

"You've got a one-track mind," Riley said, shrugging. He walked to the telephone, still covering Drake with the gun, and dialled a number and talked in Venusian for about a minute. Then he hung up and faced Drake. "Take a couple of good long drinks."

"What?"

"Now it's your ears that are foolish. You heard me. Take a good long drink from that bottle. When you're found here you'll be locked up as a drunk. The cadet's body will be gone; I've arranged for that. The 311 will be in the void by then, and anything you care to tell the authorities will sound like the ravings of an alcoholic. So start drinking."

Drake glanced at the gun, saw that it was steady as a rock in Riley's hand. He picked up the bottle, took a long swig of the burning liquor. "To the Fleet," he said.

"To the Fleet!" Riley said mockingly. "Now turn around. I'm going to sprinkle a bit of this poison on your clothes."

Drake turned around. He heard Riley move slightly, then a sudden whisper in the air, and then all hell exploded inside his head. He pitched forward to the floor, conscious only of the splitting ache in his skull and the darkness that was sweeping over him....

HANDS TUGGED at him, pulled him over onto his back. A cool palm touched his forehead, and then what seemed hours later, a damp rag was pressed to his face.

Drake sat up, cursing the throbbing pain at the base of his skull, cursing himself, cursing the world. When he forced his eyes open he saw the girl, Vanya, kneeling beside him, an anxious expression on her pale features.

"You're all right?"

"Yes, I am all right. I'm fine." He caught her arm suddenly, and she winced. "What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty. What happened?"

Drake got stumblingly to his feet and poured himself a drink. There was still time. A full hour. "What hap-

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pened?" He laughed and drank the hot liquor. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you I was sorry about what I did. I came to see if I could help you in any way. I found you on the floor."

"With the rest of the garbage," Drake said. He looked down at the girl with distaste. "Get up on your feet. And stop staring at me like a wounded cat."

"I cannot help the way I look," she said, rising.

"Oh, skip it, for God's sake." He looked down at his drink-spattered uniform, the uniform he had no right to be wearing. If you mind a man dressing in front of you, you'd better clear out."

"I've got you into great trouble, haven't I?"

"No, I got myself into it. And I'll get myself out of it. I joined up with the Venusian team to keep an Earth space ship, the 311, from getting to Saturn on time. I moved a computing arm on the master chart, because I knew that would send them hours off their schedule, and I knew that because I'm a damn bright boy who'll sell anything he's got for enough money." He stared at her with hard angry eyes as he ripped the uniform off and began putting on his civilian clothes. "But I ran into a fellow who's even brighter and who'll sell out even faster than I will. A bright young man named Riley, a captain on the 311. But I'll settle young Riley's deal for him. He shot a nice young cadet, who wasn't a bright boy and wouldn't sell out at the first sniff of a dirty dollar. Boy named Merriweather. Dumb, honest, trying to do his job. A sucker. So Riley shot a hole in him and tried to knock one in me. But he didn't make it."

Drake was talking himself into a hot rage, and the words were tumbling out in a torrent. Slamming out the door, he started down the steps two at a time. He heard the girl coming after him, heard her call, "Wait!" But he kept going, as if the clatter of her high heels on the bare steps was the sound of a legion of devils.

Buttoning his coat he went out into the dark misty night. There was a light rain falling, a cold misting rain. Drake stepped to the curb to wave down a cab. Only then did he become conscious of the three men who were standing behind him in a semi-circle. He turned slowly and saw Arish's bland yellow face gleaming at him through the misting rain.

"We are armed, of course, and we're quite ready to shoot if you behave foolishly."

DRAKE FELT a sickening numbness creeping through him. Where were his brains? Where was his common sense? He should have known they wouldn't let him undo his filthy work now. Across Arish's head he saw the girl, Vanya, framed in the luminous radiance that streamed out from the hotel lobby. She turned her face from him and walked quickly away, and almost instantly her slim body was lost in the fog. Arish glanced over his own shoulder, following Drake's gaze, but the girl had already disappeared.

A car slid to the curb behind Drake and a door opened.

"Get in," Arish said. "We will—ah—have a little conversation until the 311 has departed on its errant course."

Drake sighed and climbed into the large car. Riley and Arish and Vanya—all out for what they could get, playing anybody for anything—what the hell was the use of feeling dirty about his own part in the business? He wasn't any worse than the rest of these rats.

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Arish sat beside him, with one Venusian sitting on a small seat in the tonneau, and the other in front with the driver. They rolled off soundlessly into the dirty yellow weather. In forty-five minutes the 311 would be gone. And that was that. Who could he tell his story to? Who would listen to a dishonored renegade? Even if Arish let him go, there would be no chance of contacting the 311 until it was too late.

They drove for thirty minutes toward the outskirts of the sprawling city. Drake sat huddled in the corner of the car, a cigarette in his mouth, ignoring Arish's attempts at ridicule and humor.

"I think we shall now drive to the space port," Arish said, and leaning forward, he gave a command to the driver. "I think it will be most pleasant to watch the 311 leave. Don't you—ah—Commander Drake?"

The car turned about and five minutes later pulled to a stop before the massive gates of the space port. Arish glanced at his watch. "Just a matter of minutes," he murmured. He studied his watch as if it were the most important thing in the world. "Two minutes and ten seconds to be precise."

Drake rubbed his forehead.

Time passed.

An explosion shattered the silence, and from his window Drake saw the gleaming slender length of the 311 slash across the darkness, its rear rockets trailing plumes of fiery sparks; its passage through the atmosphere sending a cannonading echo through the night. It was on its way, curving away from the pull of Earth and driving with light-like speed toward the great planet of Saturn. And on the wrong course.

"Ah, well done," Arish said. He reached over and opened the door. "Good night, Mr. Drake. This has been a very profitable association. We will call you when we need you again."

"And you think I'll come?"

"Of course. A man in your position is like a hungry dog. He answers any whistle."

Drake stepped out of the car into the wet night. The door slammed, he heard Arish's laugh, and then the car roared away in the darkness.

DRAKE STOOD a moment, feeling the rain on his face, and then he walked tiredly toward the gates of the space port. He didn't know where he was going. He had no object in mind. He was just walking.

Then he saw her walking swiftly in the compound beyond the space port's gates, her coat pulled tightly about her slim figure and leaning slightly into the wind and rain.

The sentry stopped her, and she showed him a piece of paper. He nodded and she moved past him into the street. Drake approached her and she looked up, recognizing him with a start.

"What's the game?" he said.

"I remembered everything you said," she said, speaking breathlessly. Her face was turned up to him and he saw the raindrops on her dark lashes and the excitement in her eyes. "I remembered it all, about the computing arm and Riley and the cadet, Merriweather. And even the ship, the 311. I came here as fast as I could from the hotel and told my story, first to the guard and then to the commander of the 311. I told him I overheard some men talking about it in a bar. They arrested the man named Riley, but he ran and they shot him. They say he will die."

"They changed the chart then?" Drake said.

"They said my story was true after they looked at it. And they said they

(Continued on page 119)

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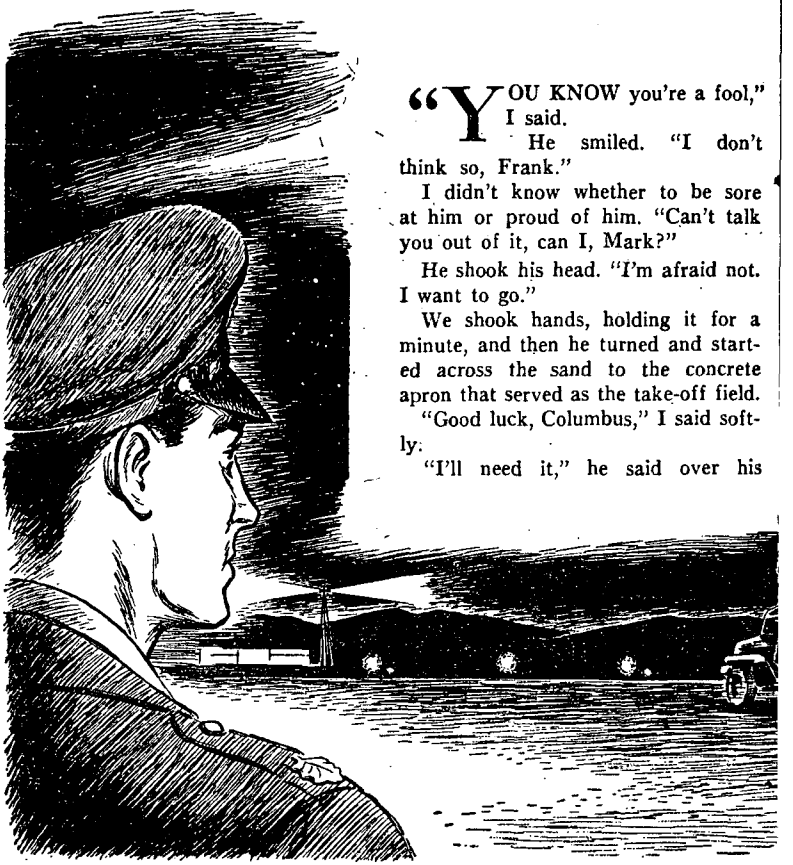
"GOOD LUCK, COLUMBUS!"

By Frank Robinson

They told Mark that only a fool would ride that rocket. But he was young enough to know that wisdom doesn't always make sense



"YOU KNOW you're a fool," I said.

He smiled. "I don't think so, Frank."

I didn't know whether to be sore at him or proud of him. "Can't talk you out of it, can I, Mark?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I want to go."

We shook hands, holding it for a minute, and then he turned and started across the sand to the concrete apron that served as the take-off field.

"Good luck, Columbus," I said softly.

"I'll need it," he said over his

Watching him walk slowly toward the rocket, I wondered if I'd ever see Mark again

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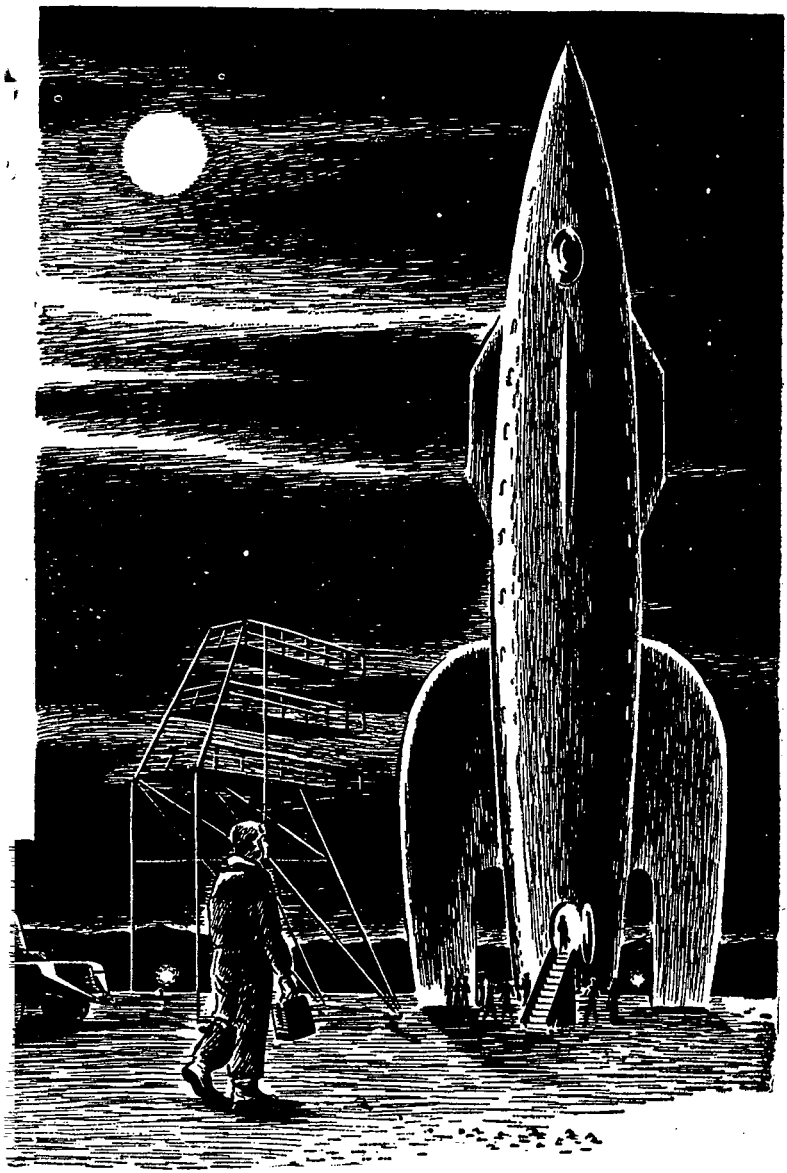

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shoulder. I watched him as he trudged across the sand, a thin shadowy figure in the moonlight. He's scared, I thought. Scared clean through. One of the few who would have brains enough to be scared.

He grew smaller in the distance and then he was on the apron, a tiny speck pinpointed in the glare of the spotlights that were focussed on the rocket. He threaded his way through the knots of mechanics and equipment trucks clustered around the rocket's base, and a moment later he was a fly on the ship's side, climbing the ladder to the open entrance port. After that, there was nothing but the silent silver cylinder gleaming in its launching scaffold.

"Good luck," I said again to myself.

I looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock, time to retrace the steps that Mark and I had made half an hour before when we had taken the short walk into the desert.

On my way back to the observation bunker, I couldn't help but think that it was a good night for the take-off. The desert air was sharp and thin, the kind that forces you to breathe deep, while overhead the friendly stars blazed away. The moon was full and I thought I could make out Mare Imbrium and Mare Tranquilatis, two of the dead seas, but I wasn't sure. Well, I could leave that to Mark, I thought. He'd get a closer look than I would probably ever have.

I shivered a little and hunched down in my jacket, suddenly aware of the desert chill.

It was going to be a good night for it. A damn good night.

SERGEANT RODNEY wiped a sweaty forehead with an equally sweaty hand and greeted me like I was a long lost relative. "It's all yours, Major," he said. He raised his voice to the pressing group of reporters. "If you'll please be quiet, Major Lyons will answer what questions he can!"

I felt uneasy and wished the hell the reporters had never shown up. My observation bunker was just off the apron, a small concrete blockhouse packed with radio and radar equipment—most of which was delicate and some of which could easily be knocked out of adjustment if somebody brushed against it. Ordinarily it held about six comfortably, and right now there must have been twice that number jammed in.

A thin looking guy with a crumpled hat and thick glasses had his hand up. "Just what part in this flight do you play, Major?" He gestured around at the radio equipment. "What's the set-up on all the apparatus?"

"Public Relations can brief you in on the whole story," I said. "In short, we'll try to keep radio and radar contact with the ship all the way to the moon and back."

"Will you be able to talk to the pilot all the way? You know, find out how he thinks and feels about the trip?" A heavy-set woman with a trace of gush in her voice had the floor.

I felt tired and my answer was curt. "We intend to record the pilot's impressions and sensations during the entire trip. The information will be valuable for any future attempts."

"How about some data on the pilot, Major? Understand he's not an army man. You leaving the piloting to the slide-rule jockeys?" I could feel the group tighten up.

"Public Relations can give you the personal history of the pilot," I said. "Since you don't have much time left, I'd like to—"

The field's public address system broke it up: "IT IS NOW TEN MINUTES TO TAKE-OFF.

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ALL UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL WILL CLEAR THE FIELD AND REPORT TO THE OBSERVATION BUNKERS. IT IS NOW TEN MINUTES TO..."

The reporters battled their way out and I was left alone with the sergeant and the guy with the crumpled hat and the thick glasses. He held out his hand.

"Name's Bolles," he said. "AP wire. They elected me to cover it in here."

"Okay," I grunted. "Don't touch the equipment and don't bother the sergeant or myself. We'll do our best to give you information when we can. Cooperate with us and we'll cooperate with you. You'll have to write long-hand since typing might interfere with any messages we get or send. Got it?"

He nodded agreement and settled himself in a canvas camp chair.

I switched on the little TV set and watched the picture of the apron and the rocket develop. The apron was almost deserted now, the ship standing alone in the glitter of the lights.

I tuned up the transmitter and made contact.

"Observation bunker calling rocket, observation bunker calling rocket. Come in please. Come in please. Over."

I flipped the receiver switch and heard Mark's voice. It sounded rather tinny over the radio and most of the inflection was lost.

"Roger, Frank. You're coming in perfectly. What's your time?"

"10:53. How's your chronometer?"

"On the button, no deviation at all. I'll call you back in a minute. Have to make a last minute check of the instrument panel."

I SETTLED back in the chair and took the cigarette Rodney offered. Bolles opened his mouth to ask a question and then thought better of it. Apparently whatever it was, it could wait. My head ached and I felt like I was drowning in the humid heat of the bunker. The damn transmitter tubes threw it off like electric stoves. Already my shirt was so sweaty it stuck to me like adhesive tape.

In sixty seconds, Mark was back on the air.

"Still there, Frank? Checked the control panel and the Geiger counters. Got a faint burp from them just a moment ago."

"I don't think it's stray radiation," I said. "There's three feet of lead between your cabin and the pile. We took all the precautions..."

"I know. I didn't say it was. Probably cosmic rays. Only 120 seconds left, Frank. I think I better get in the cocoon. Try contact again in ten minutes."

There was the squeal of a tube and then Mark's end of the line was dead.

My mouth felt funny, and I spit out the remains of the cigarette. I had tried chewing it like a stick of gum.

"He's getting into the cocoon," I said, answering Bolles' unasked question. "That's slang for a spring-supported cot—keeps him in one piece during the acceleration period." Bolles scribbled it down in his notebook, one of those green-edged kind like high school girls use in their short-hand courses.

Outside, the public address system was bellowing again.

"ATTENTION ALL BUNKERS. SIXTY SECONDS TO TAKE-OFF. SIXTY SECONDS TO TAKE-OFF."

Pause.

"FIFTY SECONDS TO TAKE-OFF. SCAFFOLD AWAY!"

In the TV screen, the huge scaffolding rolled away, leaving the rocket supported on its tripod-like fins.

"FORTY SECONDS TO TAKE-OFF."

Pause.

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"THIRTY."

Rodney sat in the corner, his eyes glued on the screen. Bolles played with his pencil a bit and then resignedly stuck it in his pocket. It was a little too much to write about history the precise moment it was happening.

I tried to imagine how Mark felt, sitting on top of a bomb and about to set it off. There was nothing to compare it to, it was simply....

"TEN."

"NINE."

"EIGHT."

My eyes were watching the screen when suddenly flame spurted out of the rear of the rocket. It hung there for a moment, supported on a pillar of fire; then the television camera angled sharply back and the rocket was a brief flare against the star-lit sky. The flare dwindled and then abruptly I couldn't distinguish it from the myriads of stars.

I SAT there silently, thinking of Mark wrapped in the acceleration cot in the tiny cabin. The night would be racing giddily by and a huge hand would be crushing him into the cot, smothering his breathing and making his limbs feel like lead.

"Can I ask some questions now?" Bolles leaned forward in his chair, his pad and pencil ready.

"Yes—certainly."

"As I understand it, the rocket isn't going to land on the moon."

"That's right. It's to go around it and then head back. Landing on the moon and taking off from there will be the purpose of the next trip."

Bolles scratched away.

"How long do you figure it will take?"

"The first leg should take twenty-four hours. By tomorrow night this time, he should be around the moon and on his way back."

"The rocket was publicized as an atomic rocket and yet it had a liquid fuel launching. How come?"

"That one's easy," I said. "The liquid fuel section will take it up about a thousand miles and then that section will drop off before the atomic drive comes on. The exhaust from the drive is highly radioactive, so much so that if we had used it at the start we couldn't use this apron again—or even come within a mile of it, for that matter. By starting the drive a thousand miles up, the exhaust will be pretty widely dissipated through the atmosphere."

He finished it off and closed the book. "That's enough on the science angle for now." He pointed to a photograph by the transmitter. "This a picture of the pilot?"

"Why, yes," I said. "That was taken about two years ago, of course."

The picture was the kind you usually see in college annuals. A little too glossy and with all the character lines painted out by the retouch artist. He had on his graduation pin-stripe and his smile showed just the proper amount of teeth. I could almost hear the photographer telling him to say "cheese." He was even thinner in the photograph than he was now and his hair looked like it wasn't used to being combed. His eyes gave the lie to the artificial smile and were much too serious for the devil-may-care expression that all good pilots are supposed to have.

Bolles lit up a cigarette. "What kind of a guy is he, Major?"

"That's kind of hard to say," I answered. "I could give you a five-minute biography but that still wouldn't explain his character or how he acts or thinks. Average family, book worm in high school, won a scholarship to college. Studied like mad. Probably wouldn't know the difference between a basketball or a baseball or how many men there were

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on a football team. When all the little kids in the neighborhood were dreaming of being cowboys or policemen, he was dreaming of being something they couldn't even pronounce—a physicist." I shrugged. "I don't think he'd make very good copy for you. He isn't a personality kid, he doesn't have the magnetism of a Lindbergh or a Corrigan. I really wish you wouldn't give him a build-up, Bolles. The public would make a hero of him and then be bitterly disappointed when he didn't live up to their expectations."

Bolles was still inspecting the photograph.

"You can get a recent photograph from the PR office, if you want one," I offered.

"Well, I don't know," Bolles said slowly. "If you don't mind, Major, I'd like to use this one."

I HAD just nodded assent when the radio crackled.

"Can you hear me, Frank? If you can, come in please, come in please..."

His voice sounded low and strained.

"All X, Mark, I hear you perfectly. Can you report on your physical condition?"

"Sick. Steady and unremitting feeling of nausea. Like when you're going down in an elevator and it keeps falling faster and faster. I closed my eyes and that just made it worse. You feel like you're falling hundreds of miles back to earth. I feel messy right now. Had the dry heaves for awhile."

I felt rather sick myself. I wanted to ask him more but I had to have an instrument check first.

"What are your readings?"

"Altitude 5,280,000 feet—one thousand miles to you. The liquid fuel section just dropped off. Pressure in cabin, one atmosphere: pressure outside, nothing. Practically no gravity pull since ship is in free fall. Slight pull because of ship itself but very slight. I'm rotating the ship a little so one side isn't always facing the sun—the rays are pretty fierce out here."

It was hard to realize I was talking to a man who was one thousand miles straight up and going further and faster every second.

Rodney had the wire recorder out, taking down everything Mark said.

"How's visual recording, Mark?"

"Good. I have the cameras going and the ports seem to work all right. Made the mistake of opening those on sunside at first and nearly fried in two seconds. Got a terrific sunburn in nothing flat.

"The view of the earth is breathtaking, Frank. At first you get the sensation of going up from it. It terrifies you to realize you're this high up. Now it seems like I'm not going up so much as out from. I can make out all of the western states and most of the rest of the country is drawing over the horizon now. Looks like a television set when you flip the off-switch and the picture shrinks in toward the middle. The whole country has come into view even while I'm talking. It's not nearly as clear as a map, you understand. Clouds hide a little of it and a lot of it seems blurry, like it was under water. I think I know why the astronomers are always complaining about the distortion of the atmosphere now. Some of the countries look like I'm seeing them through a Coney Island mirror."

"What's your chronometer reading?"

"Looks like it's stopped. What's your time?"

"Set it for 11:33," I said. I was a little worried. The chronometer was not important in itself. The point was, it shouldn't have stopped. Allowance had been made for the shock

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of take-off so by all rights the time piece should still be running. If this could happen, then, of course, other things could too.

"How are you physically, Mark?"

A moment of silence.

"Still sick. Pulse high, respiration high. Pulse about a hundred, incidentally. Not unusual, considering the tension. I've got a terrific headache of the migraine type. I have compensations, though. Getting about in the compartment is fun. There is no 'up' or 'down' or 'floor' or 'ceiling.' I can float in the center of the compartment, if I want, and move about by 'swimming' through the air. More fun than floating in the great Salt Lake.

"That's about it, Frank. I'll call you again in an hour or so. I have to change film in the cameras."

"I won't go away," I said.

BOLLES was working around the washbowl in one end of the bunker.

"Care to coffee-up, Major?" he offered. "It'll be a long grind until tomorrow night."

"Thanks," I said. "I guess reporters have their good points at that."

Rodney and Bolles and I held the cracked china cups in our hands and spent the first minute just smelling the coffee. The door to the bunker was open and the inside had cooled off to a halfway livable temperature. What was happening was just beginning to affect us but we talked around the subject rather than directly about it.

Bolles cradled the photograph of Mark and inspected it appraisingly.

"He'll be a hero tomorrow. There won't be anything that the country won't do for him. Hell, there'll be paper parades in New York, personal interviews, magazine articles...."

"Don't forget the cereal endorsements and the 'I knew him when' books by friends he probably doesn't even know he has."

Bolles looked at me curiously. "You sound like something's eating you, Major. Or just a cynic by nature?"

I shrugged. "It's just that I probably know the kid better than anybody else and I can't see him as tomorrow's hero. He's doing a job, a tough job, but to him it's just a job. It's something that's going to have to be done. Columbus never set out in his three wormy carracks just for the newspaper headlines and the huzzahs he'd get from Isabella when he returned. He went out to prove something. So did Mark."

"To prove what?" Bolles asked softly.

"I don't know if I can express it," I said. "He could be poetic about it but that's out of my line. He felt that a man shouldn't be bound to this one tiny planet. He wanted—well, he wanted to hold the stars in his hands."

A breeze swept in the open door and whirled the dust on the floor of the bunker. Outside, I could hear the slow grind of trucks carting away the remainder of the scaffolding and the shouted orders of the men working on it. In another hour the stars would be fading and we'd see the early desert dawn. Mark seemed very far away, in fancy as well as fact.

"I wonder what he's thinking," Bolles said slowly.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know."

MARK ESTABLISHED contact again in the early morning.

"Pressure normal. Cabin temperature up. It's been climbing half a degree per hour so far. Oxygen content normal. Cameras working all right, have six reels in the cans now. Not much more to do."

Bolles shoved a piece of paper under my nose. He had written on it:

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"Ask him how the moon looks."

"How's the moon, Mark?"

"It's beautiful, Frank. It's the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. You can see Tycho and Copernicus and half a hundred of the smaller craters with the naked eye. It's bigger now, of course, it covers a fair-sized section of the sky. It's—well, gorgeous. Incidentally, Frank, I'm about 50,000 *miles out. Right on schedule. I should be making the turn about nine P. M."*

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Still sick, but I'm not throwing up. The headache's gone away now. I feel kind of lazy, just floating in the cabin. I can catch half hour naps pretty easy—it's restful in that respect. There's something else, though."

"What's up?"

"I don't know. I—worry a lot and..."

He stopped and I felt like my head was splitting.

"I think I'm lonely, Frank. You know, no matter where you go on earth, there's always somebody within the next mile or so. People are gregarious, they like to stick together and talk. They like each other's company. But I'm here—fifty thousand miles out—and there's nobody else here. There's nobody around for fifty thousand miles. It's like being in a collapsed coal mine with a phone to the surface. If I couldn't talk to you...."

"I'll be here," I said. "I'll be here until you land, Mark. I'll coffee up during the day and stick to the radio like a leech. You're not alone, Mark, just remember that. Any time you want to talk, just flip the switch. We'll be here. We'll be here all the time."

He said a little more and then signed off.

I ran my hand over my face and tried to brush the sweat off. I felt like I had run a mile or gone fifteen rounds.

"He's sick," I said to Bolles. "Nausea and a touch of claustrophobia. You know how it is when you're sick. Your courage runs down, you feel sorry for yourself, you feel deserted. Maybe it will pass for him, maybe it won't. Think how it must be out there, Bolles. The sun and the stars and a disembodied voice for company."

"I'm beginning to feel it," he said. "It scares me."

THE BASE began to wake up about six in the morning when the mail truck drove out from Roswell. They blew reveille at 6:30 and the cooks started banging around the milk cans outside the mess hall. Sleepy soldiers filed down the street for breakfast and stared curiously at the bunkers around the apron. The world was waking up.

Bolles disappeared for breakfast and came back lugging a tray of bacon and eggs. Right then I felt like pinning a medal on him. I had almost forgotten how hungry I was. He brought along a copy of the early morning paper and I read the accounts of the rocket. It was a small town local but they carried the wire service reports. The paper had been printed too soon to include any long article of the take-off but a brief bulletin covered the fact that the rocket had been fired at 11:00 P. M. Thursday. Most of the material was local color and a rehash of the public relations handout on Mark. The reporters had done a bang-up job on the latter. I could see the kids mobbing the department stores for junior-size chemistry sets and inexpensive Geiger counters.

Rodney caught about half an hour of shut-eye and offered to relieve me if I wanted to nap. I waved him off and stayed by the receiver. There was nothing to report all that morning and I figured Mark had dozed

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off. It didn't matter too much as the ship was practically automatic as far as course went. A little before noon I got hold of some adhesive tape and taped the faces of my earphones; they had begun to cut my ears.

At noon Mark called in. His voice sounded flat and dull.

"Pressure normal, atmosphere normal, oxygen content normal. Temperature up two degrees since early morning—your morning. Thermometer stands at 82. *Too humid and stuffy in ship, otherwise comfort is maximum. Geiger counters reading too high. I think the lead shield leaks but it isn't dangerous yet. I'm* 175,000 *miles out and slowing for the turn. Should make it on schedule. Cameras working perfectly."*

"How do you feel?" I asked. "Have you eaten anything?"

"Haven't felt like food, Frank. The thermos of orange juice was a good idea, though. Solid food's pretty hard to keep down.

"I don't feel too good otherwise, either. Feel dirty and need a shower. Sweat a lot but the sweat doesn't run off. It spreads over your skin and sticks to you. Sometimes I can shake the drops off but then they float around in the cabin.

"The earth is pretty small now, a beautiful little globe of blue, Frank. I look at it and think of you and the other guys in the bunker and feel lonely. You don't know what it's like, to be cooped up in this cabin and floating in empty space. It's like being cast adrift in the ocean in a bathtub. If we ever send another ship, Frank, it better be a two man affair."

"Is there anything we can do, Mark?"

"I don't think—well, yes, there is. Do you think you could read the morning paper to me? Not the world news or stories about the rocket but local stuff, the man-bites-dog type."

We read the paper to him during the afternoon and then in the early evening we gave that up and made small talk. I think we covered just about everything. Nothing important and anything in particular. He was clinging to the radio now, afraid to turn it off and face the immensity of space alone. I was only a voice but right then I was the only moral support he had.

Bolles had filed four stories during the course of the day and was busy scribbling on his fifth at about eight that evening. I felt like I had known him and Rodney all my life. We even tried a three hand poker game going but none of us could follow the cards.

WITH THE coming of the turn, Mark had begun to show some improvement. He'd be cut off from us for about an hour when he was behind the moon but once that part was over, he'd be on his way home. It was the thought of that that would take him around it.

At eight fifty-five the turn was supposed to begin. He was to go into a tight orbit around the moon, a bare two hundred miles above its surface, and come shooting around the side like the end boy on a crack-the-whip team.

At nine-thirty, Colonel Johnson of rocket navigation barged into the bunker, his face white.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The operators in remote control say he hasn't started his turn yet. Have to check and see if he can do it on manual." He flipped the transmitter switch and I plugged in another set of earphones for myself.

"Hello, Mark, can you hear me?" Johnson asked.

"All X, Colonel, what's the story?"

"Listen to me very carefully, Mark, and do exactly as I say. The remote control operators say you haven't

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started your curve yet. For some reason, apparently your automatic controls aren't working. You probably haven't noticed yet that your course hasn't changed but in another fifteen minutes you would. Now you have a set of manual controls in your cabin; they're on the left-hand side of the instrument panel. Do you see the group of white buttons marked 'sequence'? All right, now you press those buttons—not yet, when I tell you to—beginning with the left hand one and wait a full sixty seconds between each. They fire liquid fuel boosters on the ship's side. The sequence is arranged so they'll launch the ship into an orbital curve around the moon. Okay? Now repeat back to me what I told you so there'll be no mistake."

He did and Johnson told him to go ahead. I could feel the sweat drop off the end of my nose and splash on my shirt.

A minute later Johnson asked: "How's your course now? Did they work?"

The answer was slow in coming.

"No," Mark said. *"No, they didn't work. The take-off must have broken the connections between the firing chambers and the push-buttons."*

Johnson leaned back in his chair with a slow sigh. "I'm sorry, Mark," he said softly.

He took off his earphones and gave them to me.

"There's nothing I can do, Frank. I imagine you'll want to talk to him."

I sat with the earphones on for five minutes before I could think of anything to say.

"Hello, Mark. I..."

"I guess I won't make it, will I, Frank?"

"No," I said. "I guess you won't."

"Would you mind staying around and talking to me, Frank? I'm lonely. Oh, God, I'm lonely!"

"Sure, I'll stay," I said. "I'll stay as long as you like, Mark."

I talked to him all night about little things, about family life, and how much fun you have when you're a kid, and how the sun feels during the summertime.

He was beyond the moon now and going straight ahead. His voice grew dimmer and at last we had to switch to Morse to keep in touch with him. All the next morning we kept it up and then he started to die out at intervals. Rodney took and sent the code but I was at his shoulder all the time, listening to the impersonal tap of the receiving key.

Late next afternoon I must have collapsed from lack of sleep and didn't wake up until it was dark out. Rodney shook my shoulder gently and I jerked awake.

"We can't raise him any more," Bolles said. He shoved some sheets of paper into my hands. "We took down his last few messages."

They were brief messages, just snatches of what he must have tried to send. There was a short one thanking me for what I had done and one or two others that were rather garbled. The last one was a phrase from the Lord's Prayer and then that was all.

Bolles finished writing in his notebook, closed it, and carefully tucked away his pencil in his shirt pocket.

"His last name was Lyons," he said. "I don't suppose he was any relation."

"I thought you knew," I said. "It was in the public relations handout. He was my kid brother."

He looked at me rather strangely and I walked out of the bunker and into the desert.

I HAD walked about a mile before I hunkered down on a dune and glared back at the bitter stars. Some-

(Continued on page 119)

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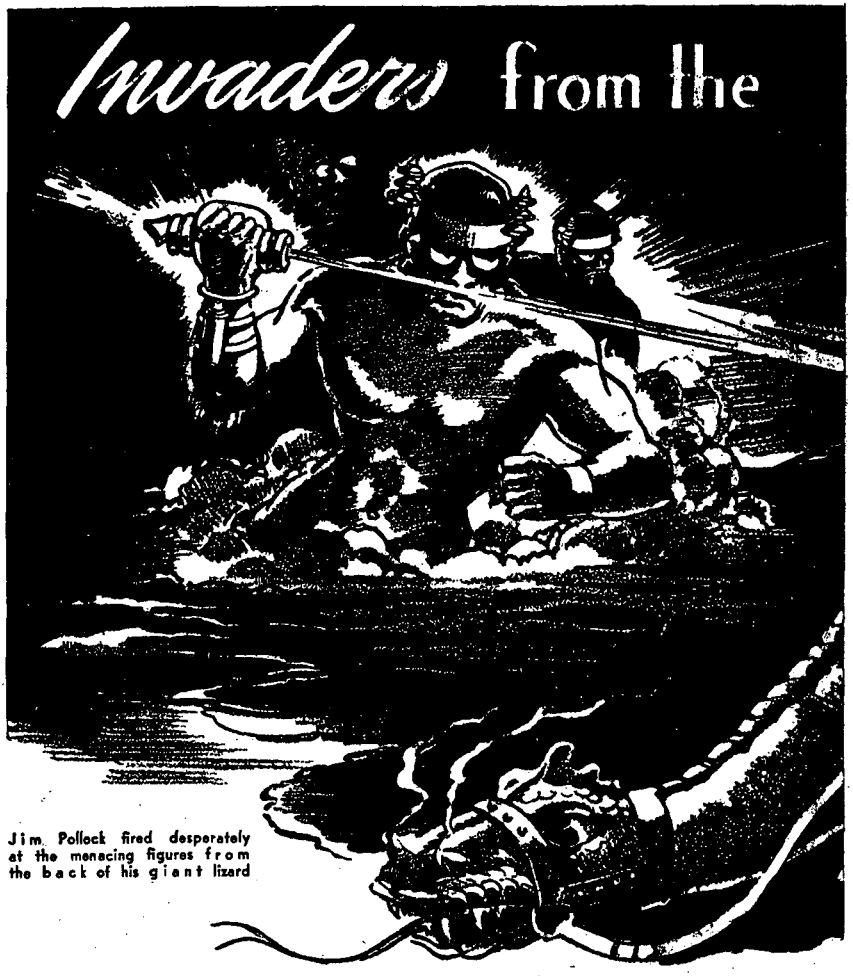
Invaders from the



Jim Pollock fired desperately at the menacing figures from the back of his giant lizard

By EDMOND HAMILTON

JIM POLLOCK felt a sudden dizziness that made the sunlit vista of New York Spaceport swirl sickeningly around him. His mouth was dry, and his whole body seemed on fire with inward flame.

He clutched weakly at a railing for support. In a moment the giddiness passed. But the fiery inward pain persisted. It would rapidly get worse, he

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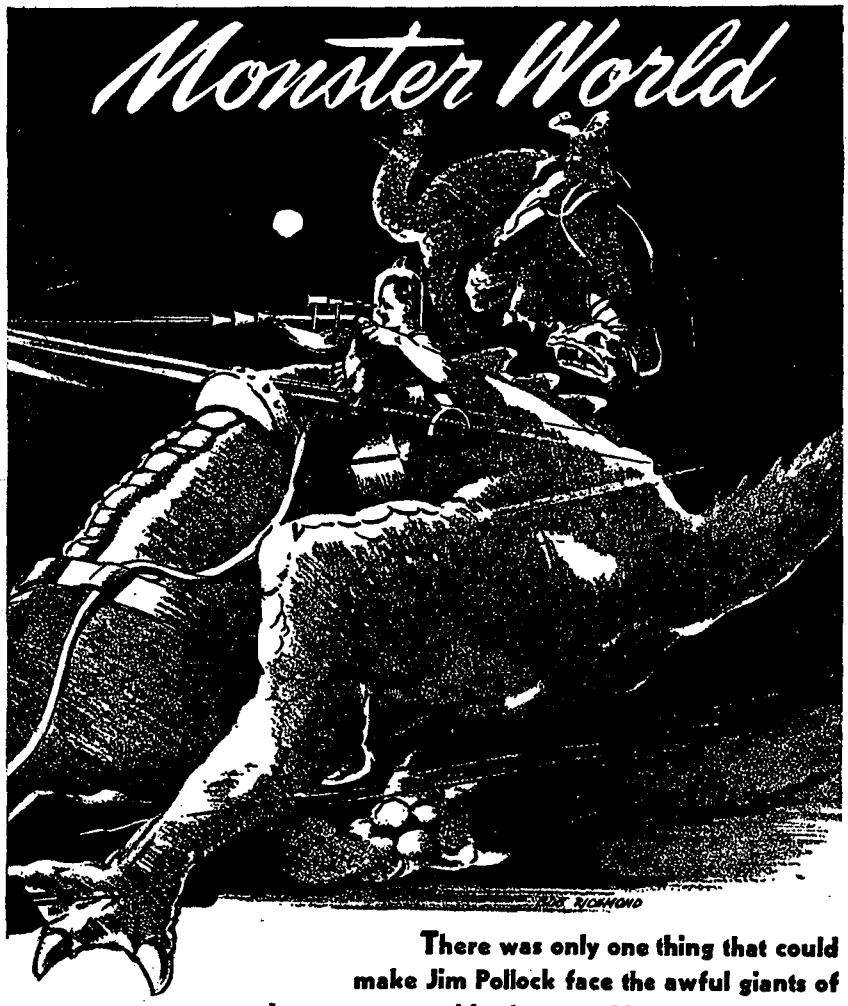
Monster World



There was only one thing that could make Jim Pollock face the awful giants of the monster world—that one thing was . . . soma!

knew. Unless he could get some soma soon, he'd be in a delirium of torment.

Pollock stumbled on across the sun-baked tarmac, along the rows of docked space-ships.

"You've *got* to do it," he told himself in a dry whisper. "It's the only way, now."

He reached the small ship at the end of the line. It was a battered craft

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with unusually large auxiliary fuel-tanks, Pollock noted. On its bows was the name *Ceres*.

A man and a girl were outside it, checking supply cases being carried aboard. The man was a burly, black-browed space officer. The girl was slender, dark, lovely even in a jacket and space-slacks.

"You're the master of this craft?" Pollock asked as the man turned beetling brows upon him.

"I'm Captain Marston," rumbled the officer.

"I heard you need men for an outer-planet voyage, and I'd like to sign on," said Pollock. "I'm an experienced spaceman, first class."

Marston frowned as he stared at Pollock's gaunt young face and haggard eyes.

"You don't look first class to me, mister," growled the officer. "You're thin and pale as a soma-drinker."

Pollock went cold with apprehension. The keen eyes of the captain had come close to his secret.

"I'm all right," he said hastily. "Just finished a hard voyage, that's all."

"Well, we're finding men hard to get, so I guess we'll have to take even you," rumbled Marston, disgustedly. He shoved a slip of paper. "Put your name on this. Outfitting-fee is forty dollars, and we take off at midnight tonight."

Pollock hastily scrawled his name on the slip. His trembling fingers closed upon the money that the captain handed him—the fee given each spaceman before a voyage so that he could get his outfit together.

He had the money! And Slih Drin's soma-joint was only a few blocks away. In a few minutes, he'd be able to ease the fiery torment that had been racking his body for the whole last week.

But the girl interfered. With a little frown in her clear brown eyes, she stepped forward.

"Just a moment," she said. "Captain Marston, I told you that you must clearly inform each man signed on just where we're going."

The burly officer protested loudly. "If we do that, Miss Graham, we'll never get a full crew together!"

The girl insisted. "It's not fair to take men without telling them our destination. Go ahead."

"Oh, all right," growled the burly officer. He told Pollock harshly, "The destination of this tub is Neptune. I suppose you want to back out now."

Pollock, itching to get away from them, hastily shook his head. "No, that's all right. Neptune is all right with me."

Marston seemed astounded. The girl too looked surprised.

"Are you sure you understood?" she asked Pollock. "We're heading for Neptune itself. It's dangerous—since you're a spaceman, you must know that no ship has ever yet come back from a landing on Neptune."

She went on. "I'm Eve Graham. My brother Alan led an expedition to Neptune some months ago. He didn't come back, any more than other ships ever did. What happened to him on that foggy world, I don't know. But I'm going there and find out. We may never come back, either. And I don't want to take crew-men who don't realize the danger of it."

Pollock felt the dizziness coming over him again. He only half heard her earnest explanation. He must get out of here quickly, to Slih Drin's—

What did he care what the destination of the ship might be? He wasn't going on it. He'd only signed on for the outfitting-fee, and what it meant to him. But he had to keep playing his part.

"Thanks for warning me, Miss Gra-

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ham," he husked. "But I'm not afraid."

"Then that's that," said Marston hastily. "You be here an hour before midnight, Pollock."

POLLOCK touched his cap, and turned away. He knew they were having a hard time getting a crew for such a voyage, and that Marston wanted to take no chance of his changing his mind.

His legs felt wobbly as he hurried back across the spaceport. The fiery pain in his body was getting worse by the minute. Everything was blurring around him.

He noticed passersby who looked at him curiously. He knew what a figure he must present, with his haggard eyes and shaking hands. Bitterly he thought of himself, only two years before, a clear-eyed, stalwart young second officer with a bright future. And now—

No time to think of all that now! He was already making his way through the ruck of shabby streets to the disreputable establishment in which Slih Drin conducted his illicit soma-traffic.

He had to knock twice before Slih Drin let him in. The bald, red-skinned Martian looked at him suspiciously.

"You get not one drink of soma unless you can pay for it!" he warned Pollock immediately.

"I can pay," husked Pollock, shoving the money at him. "Give me the stuff, Slih."

The Martian delayed maddeningly to count the bills. Then, mollified, he went into the back of his shabby apartment.

He returned with a plastic flask. Pollock broke the seal and poured the scarlet, foaming liquid into a tumbler. As he raised it to his lips, the characteristic pungent odor of the soma met his nostrils.

Soma, the most beneficent and also the most maleficient drink in the System! This product of subtle Martian chemistry was the most perfect pain-anaesthetic known. But also, if drunk too often, it could become a more tyrannical master than Earth alcohol. It could turn men into confirmed soma-drinkers. Pollock knew—he *was* one.

The pungent stuff poured down his throat. He sat down shakily upon a cot. And within a few minutes, a blessed warmth and peace began to steal through his pain-racked body.

Pain washed out of his fibers. Sleep stole upon him. And with the sleep, came the gorgeous "soma-dreams."

He was a free mind, travelling in space at tremendous velocity. He rushed past violet and copper suns, past spinning worlds of beauty and horror incredible, past racing comets and through the fiery glow of great nebulae.

He seemed to soar at will across the stupendous arc of the Milky Way, treading upon a sky spattered and spangled with thousands of suns. He vaulted up from the galactic universe, and plunged down again through the great drift of swarming stars.

From dream to gorgeous dream, Pollock passed without sensation of time. He was deep in the soma-dreams when there came vaguely a jarring, remote sound of scuffling, of a rude entrance, of a harsh, angry voice.

"Damned weakling! I *knew* you were a soma-drinker when I looked at you. And I knew I'd find you in one of these joints."

Where did that discordant voice come from, Pollock wondered vaguely? It didn't matter. He was drifting on through a magnificent vision of sky-rocketing suns and seething worlds.

But the angry voice again impinged on his dimmed consciousness, though

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still very faintly. And he had a remote sensation of someone violently shaking his numb body.

"Wake up, damn you! You signed on for a voyage, and by Heaven, you're going on it!"

Pollock's dream-drowned mind paid little attention. It didn't matter how his body was shaken or slapped. He couldn't feel it.

He could hardly even feel the sensation of being dragged somewhere, through streets to a busy, noisy place, and up a short incline.

He knew that he had been slammed down on a metal floor, because the coolness of it dimly reached him. But that was all he knew.

Vaguely, he heard the harsh, deep voice storming. "—wouldn't have brought the cursed fellow, only we're so shorthanded already that we'll need even this soma-drinker."

Pollock remotely heard the voice of a girl answer, with dismay and disgust in her tones. He was drifting off again into dreams.

A little later, there penetrated his multi-colored visions a sound that his subconscious recognized as the slam of a space-ship's airlock door. Then, very quickly, came a bursting roar. He felt a remote sensation of being powerfully pressed downward. Then the dreams completely claimed him.

CHAPTER II

POLLOCK awoke with a thick brown taste in his mouth, and a throbbing headache. He lay stupefiedly looking up at the metal bunk a few inches above his face.

Whir-r-r-r!

It was the buzzer that signalled the change of watch on a space-ship. It had awakened him, even from his soma hangover.

"Good God!" he muttered, looking appalledly around.

He was in the crew-room of a space-ship. A half dozen other men, hard-bitten Venusians, Earthmen, Martians, were clambering sullenly out of their bunks.

This ship was in space. It didn't need the porthole of blazing stars to tell Pollock that. The steady drone of rocket-tubes building up velocity, the creak and quiver of the vessel, was enough.

Frantically, he tried to orient himself. What was this ship? He vaguely remembered signing on with some craft, to get the outfitting fee. But he had gone straight with it to Slih Drin's, for soma—

He buttonholed a squat, brawny Venusian spaceman. "What ship is this?" he stammered.

The Venusian guffawed. "Listen to that, boys! This punch-drunk soma-drinker doesn't even know what ship he's on."

"We're all punch-drunk or we wouldn't be on her," whined a tall, cadaverous red Martian. He told Pollock, "You're on the *Ceres*, Earthman. And the destination is Neptune. How do you like that?"

"Neptune?" Pollock was stunned. "But nobody goes to Neptune—"

Then he dimly remembered. There had been a girl, when he signed on—a girl who had made the captain tell him that their destination was the foggy planet of mystery.

He remembered her, now. Eve Graham, her name had been. And she had been forming an expedition to go in search of her brother—to Neptune.

Pollock's raw nerves rippled with panic. He felt caught in a dreadful trap. This ship would be in space for weeks. That meant that he'd be weeks without soma.

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Weeks without soma! He knew only too well what that would mean. It would make him a tortured thing, a walking agony.

"I've got to get off!" he cried hoarsely. "They've got to put this ship back!"

A swarthy Mercurian cyc-man laughed harshly. "Hear that, Lor Ow?" he said to the squat Venusian. "Tell the old man we've got to put right back to Earth."

Pollock paid no attention to their gibing. He was too shaken with dread, too panicky. He hastened unsteadily after them as they started up the stairs to the top deck.

BRIGHT, hot sunlight slashed through the glassite wall sections to light the top deck. A red-faced first officer snarled at them as they emerged.

"What do you space rats think this is—a pleasure cruise? Next time you hear that buzzer, get up here in ten seconds."

Pollock paid no heed. He saw two figures farther along the deck. One was a girl, slim in space-slacks. He recognized Eve Graham.

The other was Marston, the captain. Pollock plunged past the first officer toward the burly, black-browed captain.

"Captain Marston, there's been a mistake!" he babbled hoarsely. "I can't go on this voyage. You've got to put me off at Mars."

Marston bent a harsh glance on Pollock's white, twisted face. "You signed on yesterday, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—," Pollock began desperately.

"But you were only after the outfitting-fee, to buy soma with, eh?" thundered the captain.

"I thought I could repay it to you later," Pollock admitted miserably.

"Well, you have another think coming," snapped Marston. "I pulled you out of that soma-joint, and you're going with us all the way, and you're going to earn every cent of your pay."

Eve Graham was looking at Pollock's shaking figure and white face with a certain repulsion. He paid no attention to her.

"You can't take me with you!" he cried desperately. "I can't go that long without soma. You've got to put me off or—"

Whack! Marston's balled fist hit his jaw and he staggered back against the deck wall. His head rang from the blow.

"Get up and get to your station!" roared the burly captain. "You'll do your work on this ship, soma-drinker or not!"

Eve Graham intervened distressedly. "Please, captain—"

Marston turned toward her. "Sorry, Miss Graham—but you hired me to run this ship and you'll have to let me do it my way. I know how to handle scum like that, and it's the only way."

The captain's black eyes bored into the sullen group of spacemen who had watched the scene.

"You can all chew on that," he rapped. "You're the crummiest crew I ever took off with, and you may think you're tough, but by God, you'll find out that I'm a lot tougher if you don't step. That's all. Mr. Harker, get them to work."

HARKER, the red-faced first officer, snapped his orders. "You'll form the Number Two watch. Lor Ow and Thubar, pilot and helmsman. Kinnel, Brabo, Thorpe and Xaxar, cyc-room. Stacy and Pollock, deckhands. Get moving!"

Pollock's head was threatening to burst. The combined effects of soma hangover and that whack on the chin threatened to overcome him.

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But the vicious lash of the first officer's voice drove him to work. He and Stacy, an old, wrinkled Earthman, started swabbing down the glassite deck-walls of the moisture that had condensed upon them.

Pollock wielded his swab clumsily, his hands feeling like lead, his legs twisting under him. He knew that gradually the hangover would pass. But in a few days would come the first craving for soma, stealing through his body, bringing the twitching ache and then the fiery pain that only the Martian anaesthetic drink could ease.

Old Stacy was looking at him quizzically. "Feelin' pretty peaked, ain't you? I've seen soma-drinkers before. I done a lot of fool things in my thirty years in space, but I wasn't never fool enough to monkey with that devil's drink."

"I know, I'm a fool and a weakling," Pollock muttered bitterly. "Enough people have told me so. You needn't rub it in."

"I wasn't meanin' to ride you about it, boy," said the old spaceman apologetically. "There ain't no angels in this crew. No decent spaceman would sign on for a trip to Neptune. They had to take men that no other ship would have."

He continued garrulously. "That Martian, Thumar, was black-listed two years ago for a barratry plot. Xaxar, that waspish little Mercurian, killed somebody on his home world and can't ever go back there. I've got an idea that Lor Ow and the other Venusian are on the dodge too, but they don't say much. And as for me—well, what other ship would sign on a spaceman as old as I am?"

And the old man cackled. Pollock hardly heard him. His mind was still swimming with the appalling realization of his predicament.

Mechanically, he swabbed along the starboard deck-walls. The vacuum swab trembled in his unsteady hands. He looked up, to find Eve Graham watching him with a shadow of mixed pity and repulsion in her eyes.

Pollock felt a dull resentment, in which was shame. He knew what he must look like to the girl—a—shaking, white-faced wreck. He was glad when Lewis, the cleancut, youthful second officer, came off duty and eagerly engaged her attention.

Pollock reeled from exhaustion when the watch finally ended. He staggered down to the crew-room and tumbled into his bunk, lying like one dead.

The hellish clamor of the watch buzzer seemed to awake him almost immediately, though he had slept hours. Yet he felt a little steadier and stronger now. The soma hangover was passing off.

He glanced through the deck wall when he reached topside. Earth was already several million miles astern, a greenish blob receding across the fringe of the Sun's glaring halo.

The red speck of Mars lay far to the right. The star-woven tapestry of the firmament stretched solemn and magnificent across the void into which the old *Ceres* throbbed and creaked and groaned.

He noted the tiny green spark of faraway Neptune. It scarcely interested him. That remote planet of foggy mystery and menace to which they were bound was of little importance to Pollock, compared to his own dire personal situation.

Eve Graham stood at the deck-wall with Captain Marston, looking toward Neptune and talking earnestly.

"—can locate the radium deposits, we'll surely find Alan's ship somewhere near them," he heard the girl saying anxiously.

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Old Stacy heard more, and relayed his information to the rest of the crew below decks on the next off-watch.

"Seems like this here Alan Graham, the girl's brother, went to Neptune after radium, an' he never come back," said the old spaceman.

"A fool's errand," spat Thubar, the tall Martian. "The fellow must have been space struck."

Old Stacy dissented. "There's radium on Neptune—the astronomers have known that for years. The planet shows it in the telespectroscope."

"Sure, there's radium there—everybody's heard that," Lor Ow grunted. "And how many men have lost their lives trying to get it? Twenty-odd ships have rocketed for Neptune, and not one has ever come back."

Xaxar, the little Mercurian, muttered superstitiously, "The Jovians say there's something ghastly out on Neptune."

"Bah, they tell those stories about every world," scoffed Stacy. "How would anyone know what's on Neptune, when nobody's ever come back from there?"

Pollock listened no longer, for he was already sinking into a slumber of sheer exhaustion. Again it seemed that he only slept a few moments before the buzzer awakened them for the next watch.

POLLOCK dragged through day after day of it. He was soft and flabby from months of idleness. And the soma had taken its toll of his strength. Already, by the time a week went by, the craving was coming back to him. His nerves were beginning to twitch from the longing.

They were well out beyond the orbit of Jupiter, now. Few ships ventured farther—an occasional trader to the new colonies on Saturn, a mapping expedition to prospect for metals on Uranus, but nothing more. Some day, pioneering Earthmen would make this region as well known as the inner planets. But that was still in the future.

And as the *Ceres* forged on and on into the vast emptiness, past even the orbit of Uranus on its steady course toward the green mystery world of the System, the motley crew became daily more uneasy. Their fears were continually fanned by Lor Ow.

"It's crazy to go on when not one ship has ever come back from Neptune! It'd be better to seize the ship and turn back to Saturn."

"Still thinkin' about mutiny?" drawled old Stacy. "You ought to know better. Maybe you'd *like* System law after you."

"System law doesn't run beyond Jupiter," the squat Venusian retorted. "We'd be safe enough in the frontier towns of Saturn."

"You'd never get there," snorted the old spaceman. "Mutiny on a spaceship these days is impossible. Only the officers carry atom-guns."

Pollock had paid little attention to the argument. Lying in his bunk, trying to conquer his quivering nerves, he felt that he could stand it no longer. He *had* to have soma, and at once.

He went up to the top deck, looking for the captain. Marston was there, talking with Eve Graham as they looked toward the growing green disk of Neptune. Pollock hated to speak before the girl, but he did.

"I'm in bad shape, sir," he husked to the captain. "If I could have just one drink of soma from the medicine chest—"

Marston stared at him implacably. "I was expecting this. And the answer is no. You dont' get a drop of the stuff."

Pollock's face was white. "But I've

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got to have some soon. If I don't, it means death."

"You soma-drinkers all say that, but I don't believe it," the captain answered brutally. "You'll stage no soma-drunks on this ship."

Pollock, sick from the shuddering of his nerves, felt frustrated and doomed as he went back down to the crew-room. He was startled to find old Stacy lying senseless on the floor. And Lor Ow had a heavy cyc-wrench in his hand.

He stared bewilderedly around the brutal faces of the crew. "What's this?"

"It's mutiny," snapped Lor Ow. "We're not going any farther toward Neptune—we're seizing the ship right now! We'll grab the officers in a few minutes when the watch changes, and then head back toward Saturn."

"That's where you come in, Pollock," he went on swiftly. "We've got to have a navigator to lay our course back to Saturn. We know you were an officer once. For navigating for us, you'll get the soma in the medicine-chest."

FOR a moment, for just a moment, Pollock's tortured nerves thrilled with the wild hope of relief. The soma in the chest would last him all the way back to Saturn. It would be a blessed release from agony.

Six years before, an Earth youngster had spent long months in the space-officers' academy, learning the discipline and traditions of the void. It was the ghost of that youngster that clamored from inside Pollock now.

"I'll have no part in mutiny, even for soma!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

He leaped back toward the companionway. The officers had to be warned immediately.

"Don't kill him!" rasped Lor Ow's voice from behind him. "We'll need him."

A wrench crashed on Pollock's head and he fell dazed upon the stairs. As his brain swam in darkness he vaguely heard the whirr of the watch-buzzer and then the feet of the men hurrying up the steps past him.

The crashing blasts of atom-guns topside roused him from his daze. He staggered up to the deck, to witness an appalling sight.

Young Lewis, the second officer, lay prostrate and Lor Ow had his atom-pistol and was firing it at Harker, just emerging from the bridge-room forward.

The red-faced mate pitched forward. Xaxar darted to snatch up his gun. But as the Mercurian did so, he tumbled dead. Marston, his massive face terrible, had appeared and shot him from the bridge-room door.

Pollock glimpsed Eve Graham beyond the captain, and the white face of the Venusian pilot as he turned his head. Lor Ow had his atom-pistol levelled at Marston's breast.

Pollock leaped. He got his arms around Lor Ow, the moment before the squat Venusian mutineer pulled trigger.

"Get this soma-crazy fool off me!" snarled the Venusian to Thubar and the other mutineers who were running forward.

His gun-blasts crashed out as he shouted. But, with Pollock on his back, his aim went wild. The blast grazed Marston's shoulder, hit the pilot in the back, and flung him across his panel of firing-studs.

Next instant came the shock of a thunderous explosion from below decks. Pollock was torn from his hold by the wild lurching of the *Ceres*. He caromed against the deck-wall.

"Get that gun!" yelled Lor Ow.

Marston, his right shoulder scorched, had dropped his weapon. Thubar darted with snake-like swiftness and got hold of it first.

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"That does it!" exclaimed Lor Ow jubilantly. "The ship's ours, men! Marston, you and Miss Graham get back against that wall. You too, Pollock!"

"Better kill them all now," said Thubar. "Then ho for Saturn!"

Marston, holding his wounded shoulder as he stood with Eve and Pollock, said grimly, "You fools are now as good as dead, yourselves."

He jerked his head toward the bridge-room where the dead pilot lay across the controls.

"That wild shot of yours that got the pilot, fixed the ship. You'll never see Saturn," said the captain.

"What do you mean?" snapped the Venusian.

As though to answer him, a wild-eyed, dishevelled cyc-man stumbled up onto the deck. It was Kinnel, one of Lor Ow's cronies.

"The cyclotrons let go!" he babbled. "The whole cyc-room crew is dead except—"

He fell. They saw then that his lips and nostrils were blackened by the wave of superheated air that he had breathed.

"Your doing, Lor Ow," said Marston harshly. "The pilot's body pressing all the firing-studs at once put too much strain on the cycs and they blew. This is a dead ship."

There was an appalled silence. Instinctively, the mutineers turned and looked through the glassite wall.

Neptune's green disk lay dead ahead, still far away but seeming ominously big and bright as the crippled, silent *Ceres* rushed toward it.

"You've got just one chance for life," snapped Marston. "None of you men have the technical knowledge to rebuild a wrecked cyc. We officers have, and could maybe do it before we all crash on Neptune. Hand over those guns and agree to stand trial when we return, and I'll try."

Lor Ow snarled viciously. "Not a chance, Marston! We'll *make* you repair those cycs!"

"How?" demanded the captain coolly. "By threatening us with death? You mean to kill us anyway. That threat won't work."

Thubar looked anxiously at the ringleader. The Martian muttered, "What are we going to do? We're heading on toward Neptune, and we'll sure crash there if we don't get the power going."

CHAPTER III

LOR OW'S flat face showed a sudden gleam of triumph as he looked at Pollock.

"We don't need Marston and the others," he declared. "Pollock was an officer once and he knows cyc-construction. He'll fix them for us."

Pollock said heavily, "No. I'll not help you. I know very well you intend to kill me too in the end, for taking sides against you."

"Oh, yes, you will help us," the Venusian said confidently. "I know a way to make you."

He turned to Thubar. "Get whatever soma there is in the medicine chest."

Then he looked back at Pollock and laughed. "I know you soma-drinkers. When you get the jitters bad enough, you'll do anything for the stuff. If we keep a glass of soma sitting in front of you a few hours, you'll be glad to repair the cycs to get it."

Pollock's heart sank. For he well knew that the cunning plan of the Venusian to play upon his weakness would be successful.

He *couldn't* long resist the soma for which his whole body cried out. He might stand it at first, but sooner or

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later his will would weaken and he would surrender.

Thubar came back, looking puzzled. "There isn't any soma in the medicine chest."

"There must be," snapped Lor Ow. "Every ship carries some, to use as anaesthetic in case of accidental injuries."

Marston interrupted. "There's no soma on the *Ceres*. I threw all we had out into space, just a little while before your mutiny started."

The burly captain glanced at Pollock. "He had been pestering me for the stuff. I knew he was desperate enough to steal it from the chest and go into a soma-drunk for days. So I tossed it out."

Rage showed in Lor Ow's eyes. "Laughing at me, are you? Will you laugh when I start blasting you all down?"

"You can't do that, Lor!" exclaimed one of the mutineers anxiously. "We can never get those cycs going without them."

"My terms still stand," Marston said calmly. "Surrender the atom-guns and obey orders, and I'll see that you all get a fair trial when we get back. Since you were lucky enough not to kill anybody, you'll probably get off with a life sentence in Lunar Prison."

"I'll see you damned first!" flashed the Venusian.

He stood for a few moments, his flat face deadly, his finger tightening on the trigger of the atom-pistol.

Pollock watched with dull disinterest. A blast of that gun would at least save him from a death more terrible—the death of a soma-drinker deprived of the Martian liquor.

And *that* death was inevitable, now. The soma that had been tossed out into space by Marston had taken his last hope with it.

"I won't kill you, yet," said Lor Ow finally. "I'll give you a little time to think it over."

His eyes glanced at Eve Graham's pale face. "I especially want you to think of Miss Graham's precarious position in this ship."

Pollock felt a surge of disgust and fury at the ugly implied threat. "You damned space-scum!"

But Eve remained unshaken. She said calmly, "don't let them threaten you through me. If they touch me, I shall kill myself."

"Take them down and lock 'em up in Number One store-room," Lor Ow gave order. "Post two men outside the door. We'll see what we can do with the cycs ourselves. Maybe we won't even need their help."

MARSTON and Pollock and Eve were herded roughly down below decks, to the empty store-room. Presently the wounded Harker, and young Lewis and Stacy, were carried in. The door was locked and they heard mutineers post themselves on guard outside it.

Stacy and Lewis, who were only stunned, soon came around. But Harker had taken a gun-blast through his ribs and was in serious condition. With the medical supplies Lor Ow had allowed them, Eve treated the mate's scorched wound and made him comfortable as possible.

Then she turned to the others. Marston was looking grimly from the tiny porthole window. But Pollock had sat heavily down.

He was feeling the torture of soma-craving nerves more strongly than before, now that the excitement had passed. He felt sick, shivering.

"What are our chances, captain?" Eve asked quietly.

Marston shrugged, wincing as the

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movement pained his shoulder. "We've got just the one chance. The mutineers can't repair those wrecked cycs, but we maybe could."

He explained. "A cyclotron is an intricate scientific apparatus. An ordinary crew-man can keep one running as long as nothing goes seriously wrong with it. But he hasn't the technical knowledge to tear it down or rebuild it. A space-officer is trained to do just that."

He nodded toward the vista of starry space that lay outside the little window.

"We're moving by inertia now, at very high speed. The *Ceres* will hit Neptune in four days. Unless its cycs are rebuilt to give it power to decelerate, it'll crash and end us all. The mutineers know that."

"Yes, but Lor Ow ain't goin' to give in 'less he has to," warned old Stacy. "That Venusian is bad medicine. I think he only signed on with this ship 'cause he an' his pals figured all along to seize it an' use it for a pirate craft on the frontier."

The old spaceman shook his gray head sorrowfully. "I tried to warn you when I realized it was really mutiny, but they got me first."

"Thanks anyway for trying," Marston rumbled. He looked at Pollock and added, "I'm g r a t e f u l to you too, Pollock. You saved me from a gun-blast through the heart when you jumped on the Venusian."

Pollock looked up at him haggardly. "Captain, did you really toss the medicine-chest soma out into space? Or were you just telling them that?"

Marston's massive face tightened. "I did it, all right. And you'll be better off without it."

Pollock made no answer. What was the use? he thought dully. They couldn't realize the hellish agony to which he was condemned.

Marston burst out. "I'm damned if I can understand you, Pollock. You fought up there like a real man. Yet you don't make any real attempt to fight this cursed soma-drinking habit."

Eve looked at Pollock with distress in her clear brown eyes. "I've heard of soma-drinkers who managed to quit. Couldn't you?"

He looked at her haggardly, but made no answer. What good would it do to reply that the few drinkers who had quit soma had not been drinking the stuff as long as he had?

"He isn't worth bothering with, Miss Graham," said Marston disgustedly. "Only a weakling would start drinking soma in the first place."

That stung Pollock to retort. "If you want to know, it was just such a loud, swaggering space-captain as you who started me drinking soma!"

He told them bitterly, "Two years ago I was second officer on a freighter bound from Saturn to Earth. I was injured in a tube-explosion aboard ship. My captain should have put in at Mars to leave me for hospitalization.

"But putting in at Mars would add nearly a week to his Saturn-Earth time, and ruin his precious efficiency record with the company. So he kept right on to Earth, and kept giving me soma to keep me from going out of my head with pain."

He shrugged heavily. "By the time I finally reached an Earth hospital, I'd been for twenty days on soma. And I found when I left the hospital that I couldn't get off it."

"Why, then it isn't your own fault at all!" Eve Graham exclaimed warmly.

"Bah, these soma-drinkers can always prove that it's not their own fault," said Captain Marston intolerantly.

Pollock s m i l e d bitterly. "That's right, captain. That's just what the Board said when they cancelled my

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omcer-rating."

YOUNG LEWIS had been listening at the door. The second officer now turned toward them excitedly.

"Listen, there's something going on in the ship!" he reported.

They were all silent, listening. There came through the ventilator-tubes a dim, confused din of hammering on metal and loudly disputing voices.

"They're working on the cycs," said Marston. "Trying to repair them themselves."

Old Stacy's wrinkled face lengthened. If they get 'em repaired, they won't bother keepin' us alive very long."

For hour after hour, the hammering din continued. It was the only sound as the *Ceres* rushed silently on through the void.

There was no break in the monotony for the prisoners except that twice during the next forty-eight hours, the door was unlocked and an armed mutineer shoved in food and water.

Pollock was too sick and shaken by the increasing soma-craving to touch either. His whole body thirsted for the Martian liquor.

Marston strode back and forth in their prison like a caged lion. "They'll never get those cycs fixed," he rasped. "But unless we get a chance at them soon, *we* won't have time to fix them before the ship crashes on Neptune."

More hours dragged by. They could hear the distant sounds of repair-work frequently interrupted by loud and angry disputes.

Lewis looked at his watch, then out into space. "We'll hit Neptune in less than forty eight hours, at this speed."

Eve Graham looked inquiringly at Marston. "Do you think you ought to give in and help them?" she asked anxiously. "If we crash, it not only means death to us—it means the last hope of finding and saving my brother is gone."

Pollock, sitting and fighting the screaming of his nerves, told her dully: "It wouldn't help any to give in. Lor Ow would kill us all the minute the ship was in working shape."

"Pollock's right," snapped the burly captain. "We'll hold out, and if we have to die, those scum will die with us."

A silence had fallen while they talked, all sounds of work having halted. The *Ceres* rushed soundlessly on toward death.

Then the door of their prison was opened. Lor Ow and Thubar and most of the other mutineers stood outside it. The weary faces of the mutineers showed that they had been engaged in intensive toil.

The squat Venusian ringleader said quietly, "Marston, you win. We've found that we can't rebuild the cycs ourselves. You'll have to do it."

"My conditions still stand," the captain answered. "Hand over your weapons, and agree to return and face your trial. Only then will we start work on the cycs."

"All right, it seems we have no choice," Lor Ow said. "Here's my gun. Thubar, give him yours. The others are still in the locker."

To Pollock, there was something suspicious in the readiness with which Lor Ow had suddenly surrendered.

Marston also seemed to suspect a trick, for he took the two atom-pistols and fired a test-blast from each down the corridor outside.

"Thought you might just be clever enough to give us useless guns," he said harshly to Lor Ow. "But these are all right."

He handed one of the weapons to Lewis, and they led the way to the top deck. Marston's first act was to in-

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spect and then lock up the other atom-pistols, after giving Stacy and Pollock each one of them.

The Captain's bleak gaze swept the mutineers, then. "We may, or may not, pull out of this. If we do, you'll all face a space-court. But obedience to orders from now on will count in your favor. Any man who disobeys will get short shrift now."

The mutineers took this silently. But Pollock thought he detected a lurking gleam of mockery in Lor Ow's flat face.

His suspicions increased. But how could there be any trick? They themselves now possessed the only atom-guns on the ship.

"We'll obey orders, but for space's sake get the cycs going!" pleaded Thubar worriedly. "Look how near we are to Neptune!"

THROUGH the bridge window, Neptune was indeed an appalling sight. Its cloudy green globe seemed to fill half the firmament. And the *Ceres* was rushing silently and ever more swiftly down toward the mystery planet.

Marston checked their position rapidly by means of the space-sextant, and then noted their speed. He computed, frowning.

"About forty hours before we hit Neptune," he muttered. "It's not much. Let's see what the cycs look like. You come too, Pollock."

When they went down to the cyc-room, an exclamation of despair came from young Lewis at the first glance.

"They're all hopelessly wrecked! We'll never repair *these* in forty hours!"

The six massive, spool-shaped cyclotrons that were the *Ceres'* source of atomic power were a complete wreck. The sudden simultaneous firing of all rocket-tubes had put too great a load on the power pipes, and they had back-blasted into the cycs, which had promptly exploded.

Pollock, his trained eye running over the ruined mechanisms, silently agreed with the pessimism of the young second officer. But the dark outlook hardly added to the hopelessness of his own agonizing personal predicament.

"We can't rebuild all six cycs in that time, I agree," rapped Marston. "But two of them would give enough power for the bow-tubes, and enable us to decelerate speed enough to check our fall."

He continued crisply. "We'll try to rebuild Number One and Two by salvaging parts from the other four. Lewis, straightened out the tools. Pollock, I'll need you to help us."

Lor Ow and his followers had made blundering attempts to repair the mechanisms, but had succeeded in little more than reducing the cyc-room to confusion.

Pollock set to work with the captain to dissemble the four rear cyclotrons. The task was a difficult one, the bolts strained and joints started by the explosion. And the tools slipped in his nerveless hands, his movements were clumsy and uncertain.

It had been two years since he had worked on a cyc. And in his present condition, the soma-thirst tearing at his nerves and brain, he felt totally unable to assist in this exacting work.

"Don't twist that injector-tube!" snarled Marston, sweating. "Can't you see your wrench slipped off the coupling?"

"My fingers are all thumbs," Pollock said thickly.

He felt like dropping the tools, giving up the hopeless attempt. But ingrained tradition would not permit him to do that.

And his mind still held one faint hope

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for soma, if they could reach Neptune safely. Alan Graham's ship, which had never returned, must still be there. And every ship carried soma in its medicine-chest!

IT TOOK them twelve hours to tear down the wrecked cycs. And then they found there were not enough undamaged parts for two cyclotrons.

"We'll have to use the atomic welders to reshape these strained injectors and make new couplings," sweated Marston. "I don't know——"

Their work had become a terrible race against time, as the *Ceres* rushed closer to the giant green sphere of the foggy planet.

Pollock's dazed mind hardly apprehended the passage of time. His fingers dropped tools and could not pick them up. He staggered drunkenly.

"Give up!" shrieked his brain. "You're going to die anyway from lack of soma. There's no real hope of finding any on Neptune!"

And yet he could not surrender, not while Marston and Lewis were toiling madly on, not while Eve Graham's wide eyes watched them.

"Only ten hours till we crash—it's hopeless!" muttered Stacy.

Pollock hardly heard, for he was helping Marston bolt in the injector on the second of the two cycs they had rebuilt.

"Both cycs ought to run now," Marston said hoarsely. "We'll take time only to connect them to the bow and keel rockets."

That required an hour more of work. Only nine hours were left in which to decelerate the ship, as Marston led the way to the bridge.

Marston took the pilot-chair, started the cycs. They droned irregularly, then strengthened to steady power.

"Strap in, all of you!" Marsh called over his shoulder. "The deceleration I'll have to use will smash you to butter if you don't."

Neptune was a terryfying spectacle, from here in the bridge. A colossal, cloudy green globe that bulked across almost all space ahead of them, and cast a weird viridescent light through the window upon them.

Lewis hurried back to strap the wounded Harker into his bunk, and the crew sought their own bunks. But Eve Graham stayed in the bridge.

"If—if we crash, I want to be here," she said steadily.

Pollock helped her strap into one of the recoil-chairs in the bridge, and got into another himself. He was exhausted, his brain spinning.

Crash! Crash! Marston was firing the bow rockets with reckless disregard for the safety factor. The thrust-struts of the *Ceres* screeched beneath the braking action. Each shock tore Pollock's soma-tortured nerves.

The ship slowed down, hour by hour. Yet it was still rushing at far too great a speed down toward the giant green planet.

Scree-e-e! The thin shriek of Neptune's upper atmosphere outside the hull finally penetrated through the daze that had gripped Pollock. Marston, his massive face sweating and terrible, fired the bow tubes again.

Down into a green, weird universe of curling mists the space-ship was slanting. Parting atmosphere roared louder outside the hull.

"We may make it if we can find a place to land down in that fog!" cried the captain. "Turn on the radio-sonde!"

Pollock switched on the radio-sonde, whose impulses were projected donward and reflected back up again to indicate their exact altitude above the solid surface of the planet. He called the

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readings hoarsely.

"Forty thousand feet—thirty-six—thirty-four—"

They were losing altitude with sickening speed. Desperately, Marston fired both the keel and bow rockets.

Then as they rushed still lower, they glimpsed the vague outline of great forests beneath them in the shrouding mist.

Eve Graham screamed suddenly, pointed ahead. "Captain—"

Marston and Pollock both saw, before she finished the cry. And the sight made Pollock's skin crawl with horror.

A high dark rock cliff loomed full ahead of the downrushing *Ceres*. Marston frantically fired the bow rockets again, his foot jamming the cyc-pedal to the floor. The spaceship seemed to stand wildly on its tail for a moment. Then it crashed down into the forest.

CHAPTER IV

EVEN as the spaceship crashed down through the mist-shrouded forest, Marston had fired a last thunderous burst of the keel rockets.

The *Ceres* seemed to hesitate in mid-air. Then it hit the ground with a jarring thump that made their recoil-chairs scream in protest.

Silence followed as the burly captain cut the cycs. He mopped sweat from his brow. "By Heaven, I wouldn't want to make another landing like that!"

Pollock, momentarily dazed by the shock, turned toward the girl in the chair beside him. "You're all right, Miss Graham?"

"Yes, I'm not hurt," she said shakily. Then, pointing through the broad window, she cried, "But look out there!"

Greenish mist curled against the window like phantom fingers. Through that drifting fog, the light of the distant sun pentrated only as a sad twilight. They could only vaguely discern the outlines of the weird planetary forest in which they had landed.

Unearthly it look, veiled by the mist! Tall, leafless green growths like enormous lichens towered up all around them. There were big club-mosses of a pallid hue, and a thick, pale turf.

Glittering little flame-birds darted across their field of view. It was a species found on most of the outer planets. But they all exclaimed in amazement as two flame-birds of a hundred times the usual size flapped by through the upper mists. Two birds huge as the rocs of fable!

"What the devil!" swore Marston, his massive face stupefied. "It must be a trick of refraction. Nobody ever saw flame-birds *that* big!"

"Nobody's ever seen Neptune before, and gone back to tell about it," Pollock reminded somberly.

The captain unstrapped and stood up. "I'll see to the others. You run an air-test, Pollock."

It did not take long for Pollock to operate the ingenious air-tester which within a few minutes had sucked in a sample of the atmosphere outside, analyzed it, and flashed its findings on the dials.

He jotted down the readings and then with Eve Graham left the bridge-room. They found Marston and Lewis had gathered together the rest of the crew in the top-deck.

Lor Ow and Thubar and the other quodam mutineers were staring in mingled doubt and apprehension through the deckwall at the weird landscape outside.

"By the grace of God, we've got here without being splashed all over the landscape," said Marston bluntly. "But it's going to be an even harder job to get away from here and return safely to Earth.

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"It will take the power of all six cycs to pull away from Neptune's gravity. That means we have to rebuild the other four. And *that* means that we're all going to work, for many of the damaged parts will have to be re-made by us with what tools we have."

Lor Ow spoke up quickly. "We'll obey whatever orders you give, captain. We'd a lot rather face a space-court trial than be marooned on this crazy-looking planet."

Pollock looked narrowly at the flat-faced Venusian. He still suspected a hidden purpose behind Lor Ow's quiet surrender.

He told himself his soma-jittery nerves were making him jumpy. There was nothing to fear, when only he and the officers had atom-guns.

"Captain Marston, what about my search for Alan?" Eve Graham asked eagerly. "Can we start looking for him at once? We can't be so terribly far from the plotted location of the radium-beds."

Marston shook his head. "We can't look for your brother yet, Miss Graham. Not until we get the *Ceres* in shape. We know this is a dangerous world, and our first necessity is a possible means of escape."

"But Alan may be dying somewhere, hoping for help!" she pleaded.

The captain was adamant. "I'm sorry, but it's just commonsense to repair our ship first, and then start searching for your brother."

EVE GRAHAM'S pale face showed the depth of her disappointment and distress. And Pollock felt an equal though different disappointment.

He had been desperately hoping that they would at once start searching for the missing explorer's ship. In the medicine-chest of that ship, if they found it, it would be the only possible source of the soma that his quivering nerves demanded.

"What about the air test?" Marston was asking him.

"It shows okay in oxygen and nitrogen content," Pollock answered. "There's a certain amount of inert gases, but it's quite breathable."

The captain nodded. "Then we won't need space-suits. That'll help. Come on and we'll take a look outside."

The space-door was opened and the gangway lowered. Marston strode down it, with Pollock, Lewis and the girl following him.

They felt no increase of gravitation. Every interplanetary traveller these days wore at his belt the flat, compact gravitation-equalizer which made his weight the same in space or on any planet.

The air was chill, not as cold as they had expected. It was foggy and damp. And it conducted sounds very clearly, for they heard a variety of strange rustling and bird and animal cries out of the mist.

"I want a look at that cliff we nearly ran into it," said Marston, frowning. "I thought I glimpsed something queer about it."

They started forward through the solemn, mist-shrouded lichen forest. The *Ceres* was soon swallowed by the greenish fog behind them.

Gigantic dragon-flies of a size incredible hummed loudly above the lichens. Yet there were ordinary small insects, too. And they glimpsed an ordinary two-foot swamp-lizard.

"The fauna here seems much like that of Jupiter and Saturn, yet some species seem to have attained enormous size," commented Marston.

Pollock was too numbed by fatigue and the persistent dull ache of his nerves to feel great interest. But he

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was abruptly aroused.

Marston had stopped suddenly. "Listen! Do you hear that?"

The ground beneath their feet was vibrating to the tread of something that was approaching them from the mists ahead.

"Only a beast of enormous size could shake the ground like that!" exclaimed the captain. "We'd better fall back."

"Too late—look at that!" yelled young Lewis wildly.

Out of the mists in front of them had towered an enormous shape, a thing out of nightmare.

It was an ordinary swamp-lizard in shape, a scaled, quadrupedal, dragon-like reptile with a small head on a long, snaky neck.

But this swamp-lizard was scores of times bigger than the normal species. It was huge as the brontosauri of ancient Earth!

"Don't shoot!" Pollock yelled as Lewis wildly raised his atom-pistol. "You can't kill it and you'll only infuriate it!"

The gigantic lizard showed no sign of attacking them. It simply stared down at them from the curling mists, and then calmly went on cropping tender young shoots from the towering lichens.

"I'm blasted if the thing isn't *tame!*" exclaimed Marston, stupified.

"There's more of them coming!" exclaimed Eve Graham.

Through the mist appeared a half-dozen more of the giant lizards. But these were an even more astounding sight.

For they wore bridle and saddle and bore riders. *Human* riders, men who had greenish skins and wore leather harness instead of clothing, and who carried long black tubes that looked like queer blow-guns.

"Don't move and don't shoot!" said Marston quickly as they all recoiled. "They may not be hostile."

"Human natives on Neptune!" exclaimed Lewis hoarsely. "And they've tamed those giant lizards for mounts. It's incredible!"

TWO of the Neptunians were dismounting from their giant steeds, and cautiously approaching the Earthmen while the others watched closely.

"They look like Jovians, in a way," muttered Pollock. "The same green skins and dark hair. And yet—"

So strong seemed the resemblance that as the two Neptunians came nearer, Pollock spoke to them in the native tongue of Jupiter.

"We are friends, just landed upon your world!" he said.

The Neptunians understood. For the older of the two, an erect, aging man with authority in his bearing, answered instantly.

He spoke a tongue that was dissimilar in many respects from the Jovian language, yet which was mostly understandable.

"We saw your star-ship fall!" the Neptunian leader said. "And now you speak our language. Tell me, do you come from the world of the ten moons?"

"The world of the ten moons?" repeated Marston, puzzled.

"He means Jupiter!" said Pollock. "He told the Neptunian, 'We come from an even more distant planet. But what do you know of the ten-mooned world?'"

The old Neptunian explained. "Our ancestors came from there long ago, in star-ships like yours. But in time we lost the secret of such star-ships, as we lost many other powers our forefathers possessed."

Pollock felt wonder, even through his daze of exhaustion and nervous strain.

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They had uncovered a lost chapter of planetary history.

"These people are descendants of colonists from ancient Jupiter! We know the Jovians of the remote past had a great civilization, and explored and colonized Saturn and Uranus. Well, they came here also."

"That accounts for the similarity in the fauna here!" Marston exclaimed. "Except for the giant size of some of the species. I still can't understand that."

The captain came to the matter uppermost in his mind. He told the old Neptunian, "We need certain metals with which to repair our ship. Have you any such?"

"We have certain metals that we use for weapons and implements," admitted the Neptunian. "If you will come with us—the town of my tribe is not far away."

They started through the mists, walking beside the gigantic lizards whose tread shook the ground. Very soon, they emerged from the lichen forest into a belt of clear plain beyond which towered the dark, high cliff into which the *Ceres* had almost crashed.

A number of the giant lizards were browsing along the edge of the forest here. Racks of bridles and saddles stood nearby. The mounts of their escort were unsaddled and turned loose to join the others.

"Don't you keep them in a corral or anything?" Pollock asked the old chieftain wonderingly.

"There is no need, for the lizards would not run away," was the answer. "And if they were penned up, they could not escape when those of the Monster World came."

The reference puzzled Pollock, but before he could ask a question, the old Neptunian waved a hand toward the steep cliff.

"This is the town of my tribe."

"Town?" echoed Pollock. "But there's nothing here—"

Marston spoke quickly. "I get it. See those cave-openings in the cliff? That's where these people live, in the cliff. I *thought* I saw such caves just before the *Ceres* crashed."

The whole face of the cliff, at the bottom, was ridled with the mouths of tunnels. The Neptunian led toward one of them.

He uttered a shrill cry. Green-skinned men and women poured out of the tunnels. The men were armed with blow-guns and with rudely forged swords and spears of drab-colored metal.

"Pure tungsten, it looks like!" exclaimed Marston eagerly. "If we can get enough of that, we can mix it with salvage metal from the ship to make enough high-test alloy for all the cyc-parts we need."

"There is much of the metal near here," the Neptunian chieftain replied to his question. "We can show you where."

Eve Graham was staring wonderingly. "How could these people ever have come from Jupiter? They look barbaric, only half civilized."

"They're the result of ages of retrogression," Pollock said. "Must have been cut off, isolated here when the ancient Jovian civilization perished."

"Ask them if they saw my brother's ship!" she begged anxiously.

MARSTON put the question to the leader of the Neptunians, who had gathered about them and were staring in child-like, friendly wonder.

"No, no other star-ship has ever landed here," was the reply.

"Alan wouldn't have landed here, as we did by accident," Eve said quickly. "He'd land at the plotted location of the

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radium beds, as we intended."

Marston drew from his pocket a map on which was marked the exact location of the radioactive deposits which astronomers had noted on Neptune.

"The radium beds are northeast of here," he decided. He pointed in that direction, asking the Neptunians, "Are you sure no star-ship landed, a day's march from here in that direction?"

The result of his question was astonishing. A babel of exclamations burst from the Neptunians. Something like fear appeared on their faces.

"No, we know nothing of anything there!" exclaimed the old chieftain. "For there lies the Monster World!"

Pollock remembered the previous reference. Puzzled, he asked, "What is the Monster World?"

The old tribesman answered volubly. "It is a great, deep valley which is an accursed and fearful place. The air in it *glows*. And any living thing which breathes that glowing air is horribly changed by it, becomes swiftly scores of times larger than normal."

He pointed to the giant lizards grazing nearby. "They are lizards which ventured into the Monster World and came out gigantic in size. In the same way, any animal or bird or insect that enters it and breathes its accursed air will quickly grow to colossal size.

"*Men* grow gigantic there, too! Some of our own race long ago entered it and became giants in stature. They are our most-feared enemies now, those giants of the Monster World. It is because of them that we live in the cliff, for they are too huge to enter our tunnels when they invade our region here."

Pollock was stunned. He looked incredulously at Marston. "Can it be true? We've seen the giant lizards and birds and insects—but giant *men?*"

Barston's massive face was startled in expression. "It *could* be true," he muttered. "The "glowing air"—that's radioactive fog from the radium beds. And breathing that radioactive air could have terrific effects on glandular and cellular growth."

"But Alan?" cried Eve Graham, white to the lips. "He was going to land there, right where the spectroscopic maps showed the radium!"

The old Neptunian, when he understood here, shook his head. "If any star-ship landed there, its occupants would not live long. The giants of the Monster World w o u l d s l a y t h e m quickly."

"Then—then my brother may have been dead for months?" whispered Eve, agonized.

Pollock felt almost as appalled as the girl, for another reason. All that had kept his tortured body going was the hope of getting soma from Alan Graham's ship. And that ship lay somewhere in the dreaded Monster World!

CHAPTER V

NIGHT lay over the *Ceres*, whose occupants slept exhaustedly after a fourth day of urgent work at rebuilding the cyclotrons. The labor of securing metal and casting new parts had required the toil of all.

Pollock a l o n e remained wakeful, jerkily striding back and forth in the top deck. He had offered to stand watch because he had known that even in his present fatigue, he could not sleep.

"I've got to do something—now, tonight!" he said thickly to himself.

Pollock's torment had reached its climax. His face was gaunt and wild, his eyes tortured. Every nerve in him shuddered uncontrollably.

"There's just one chance for soma. And I've got to take it before I go

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mad!"

He peered out through the deck-wall. A ghostly, feeble light was stealing through the misty lichen forest. It came, he knew, from the rise of Neptune's big moon. And it finally decided Pollock.

His body cried out for soma. And the only possible place where it might be found was in Alan Graham's ship, somewhere in the dreaded valley of the Monster World. Marston would not let him go, if he knew. He must start now, slip away before the captain awoke.

But he didn't know the exact bearings and distance of the radium valley. The captain knew, of course. But one other person also knew—Eve Graham. She had a copy of the astronomical chart on which the location of the source of radium emanations had been plotted.

Pollock had to have those bearings if there was to be a chance of success for his desperate plan. He must get them from the girl—now!

He went back into the stern of the *Ceres* and softly tapped at her door. "Miss Graham," he whispered.

He heard a light turned on inside and then the door opened. Eve Graham, slim in silk sleeping-slacks, looked out at him startedly.

He knew that his haggard, unshaven features and trembling figure were not likely to inspire confidence in any girl. Yet when he put a warning finger to his lips, she admitted him unquestioningly to her cabin.

"I know how anxious you are to find out your brother's fate, Miss Graham," he began hoarsely.

She made an impatient gesture at his form of address. "My friends call me Eve."

For a moment, flooding emotion held Pollack silent. It had been so long since any girl had spoken in straight, comradely friendship to the haggard soma-drinker which he had become.

"I'm going to be honest with you," he said thickly. "I'm nearly crazy for soma, and I've got to have some. The only possible chance is to get to that radium valley and find your brother's ship. But Marston wouldn't let me go yet, and I don't have the location of the valley.

"I want you to give me your copy of that map. Frankly, I'm going tonight because I have to have soma or go mad. But if I do find your brother's ship, I can bring back some clue to his fate. Will you help?"

Eve Graham looked startled and doubtful. "How could you enter the valley if the radium fog in it is so deadly in effect?"

"I'll wear a space-suit helmet, so as not to breathe that air," he answered quickly. "And I can take one of the Neptunians' tame lizards to get to the valley. There's a chance I can make it. What about it?"

The girl's brown eyes met his. "I'll do more than just give you the map. I'm going with you."

Pollock was appaled. "No, you can't! It's too dangerous."

"I've got to know without further waiting whether Alan is alive or dead!" she exclaimed. "Now that the ship is almost r e p a i r e d, I'm afraid more trouble with the crew may force us to leave Neptune without being able to search for Alan."

Pollock expostulated, but the girl was firm. "If you try to go without me, I'll awake the whole ship!"

He had to give in. Even at the risk of taking Eve Graham into deadly danger, he couldn't give up his one wild hope for soma.

"Get *two* space-helmets, and wait for me outside the ship," she whispered.

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"I'll bring the map."

POLLOCK stole forward through the sleeping craft, and from the bridge-room took a small gyroscopic compass. He secured two of the transparent space-helmets, each with its small attached tank of compressed oxygen, and then slipped out into the chill, foggy night and waited.

He had his atom-pistol at his belt, but he knew how little the weapon might avail against the dangers of Monster World. He was mad to let Eve go with him! But he *must* find soma now, at once.

Eve appeared beside him in a few minutes. She had dressed in jacket and slacks.

"Are you sure we can get two of the lizards to ride?" she whispered anxiously.

Pollock nodded. "The Neptunians always leave them uncoralled. And the big beasts are prefectly tame."

During these past four days of grinding toil, they had had opportunity to learn much more about the Neptunians and their huge beasts of burden. The green-skinned natives had thronged round the *Ceres* by day.

But no Neptunians were ever abroad at night. So that Pollock and the girl met no one as they went through the wan, misty moonlight of the linchen forest toward the cliff-home of the tribe.

The gigantic lizards were grazing quietly along the forest, as usual. Despite his confidence in their tameness, Pollock felt trepidation as he took two bridles and saddles from the rack nearby and approached the huge reptiles.

His confidence was justified. The lizard he went up to stood quietly as he scrambled up its rough, scaly back and affixed the bridle and saddle as he had seen the Neptunians do. He helped Eve into the saddle, and soon had saddled another of the lizards.

Perched on the back of the great creature, many yards above the ground, he called softly to the girl.

"Simply slack your reins, and it will start. But first, what's the direction?"

She had, apparently studied the map. For she gave him the bearing without hesitation.

He studied the luminous dial of his gyro-compass, then turned his huge mount northeastward and let his reins slacken.

The lizard started forward through the lichens in rapid, ambling strides. Pollock, his knees gripping the saddle, felt as though he rode the crest of a big wave, so smooth was the motion.

Eve was riding close beside him, her face pale in the misty moonlight. But soon she had plucked up more confidence in her steed.

"At this speed we ought to reach the place before morning!" she called, her voice excited and hopeful.

Pollock almost forgot the torturing thirst for soma that was driving him, in the thrill of their strange night ride.

The two giant lizards seemed perfectly at home in the moonlit mists of the lichen forests, seemed able to perceive and avoid all obstacles. Their pace increased, their great webbed feet shook the ground as they rushed faster through the chill fog of Neptune's night.

Towering lichens and grotesque fungi flashed by in the mist. Mossy turf vibrated soundlessly beneath their passage. Birds and animals, some of them of freakishly huge dimensions, crashed away in startled flight before them.

IT WAS like one of the soma dreams, Pollock thought a little wildly. Yet not even the weird unreality of it could dim the sense of danger that rose in him when he remembered the denizens of this world who were most to be

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reared, the giant men who had grown from Neptunians who dared enter Monster World.

He had hung his space-helmet on his back, giving Eve hers to carry in the same way, and it bumped his shoulder-blades with each colossal, running stride of his great mount. At regular intervals, he called to the girl, and checked their course by the gyro-compass.

"It can't be far away," her anxious voice trailed back to him on the wind of their passage. "We've been riding for hours."

For hours? Pollock's dazed mind was so little able to apprehend the passage of time that it seemed hardly more than minutes.

He shook himself, trying to steady his twitching nerves. The greatest danger lay ahead. And if he failed, if he couldn't find soma—

He wouldn't let himself think of that dire possibility. His tortured mind rejected it in an agony of apprehension.

"Look at that glow ahead!" cried Eve to him, pointing.

Pollock saw. Far ahead in the lichen forest there was a pulsing white glow of light that stood out bright by contrast with the wan moonlight of the mists. A white, muffled radiance that was brightest close to the ground.

"It must be the valley," he husked. "You remember the Neptunians spoke of the "glowing air" in the Monster World."

The lizards, for the first time, were slowing down. The giant steeds seemed reluctant to go further.

Pollock hammered the scaled back of his mount with the butt of his atom-pistol. Unwillingly, the two lizards went on.

"Better put on your helmet," he called to Eve. "If it's really the valley, we don't want to breathe any of that air."

He donned his own helmet. They could still converse easily, for a short-range audiophone was built into each helmet.

Twenty minutes later their two giant mounts emerged from the lichen forest and suddenly stopped short. And from Pollock and Eve came exclamations of amazement and horror as they saw what lay ahead.

"Good God, the valley—the Monster World!" he husked.

Their steeds stood upon the brink of an enormous, oval valley whose side sloped down from where they stood. It was of great depth, and was filled with an amonous, glowing haze that partly dispelled the shrouding mists.

The luminosity that impregnated the air down there seemed to emanate from shining cliffs at the farther end of the valley, miles away. Pollock knew what that luminosity was. It was radioactive fog, whose source was the tremendous radium deposits in those shining cliffs.

What they could see of the valley's floor looked mostly marshy and muddy, with beds of giant reeds extending toward swampy pools. The heavy radioactive fog, trapped in the valley, did not reach up to where they sat.

"Look, isn't that a ship just beyond the reeds?" cried Eve Graham excitedly.

She was pointing, and in a moment Pollock too saw. It was a big, long object, half-buried in reeds and mud.

"It *might* be a ship," he said hoarsely. His nerves flamed. If it was, if there was soma in it— "Eve, you wait here while I see."

"No, I'm going with you," she flashed. "You agreed!"

POLLOCK slackened rein, urged the lizard he bestrode forward. But the

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giant reptiles did not want to go down into the valley.

It was not, he knew, that they were afraid of the glowing fog. They had themselves grown to their giant dimensions by breathing that fog. It was some thing or things down in that glowing haze that they feared.

He finally got them started down the slope. Pollock's skin crawled as the clammy, radiant fog touched his skin. Only the helmet kept him from breathing that deadly radioactive atmosphere and suffering its terrible effects.

The reeds towered up in front of them when they reached the valley floor. They urged the lizards through the stalks in the direction of the object they had sighted.

Sharp spears of the reeds ripped up at them as the lizards shambled rapidly through, tearing their slacks to tatters. He urged their mounts faster. His brain was afire with trembling, thirsty hope.

The reeds thinned out a little. They glimpsed closer ahead the object they sought, a long, torpedo-like bulk half-buried in mud. It *was* a space-ship, a small eight-man cruiser. And—

"It's Alan's ship!" Eve's voice rang frantic with sudden hope. "It's the *Meteor!*"

She urged her lizard wildly forward. Then, as they galloped toward the half-buried craft, Pollock's eyes lifted to beyond it.

His hair bristled on his neck with horror at the incredible apparition that he beheld.

Two gigantic figures were looming up through the shining haze beyond the reeds and the ship. Two gigantic *men!*

They were w a d i n g waist-deep through the pools beyond the reeds, yet even so, their colossal figures towered up sixty feet in the haze. Their skin had a curious luminous quality, but their features were those of Neptunians.

The two colossi wore harnesses of leather that looked like tanned lizard-skin, and wore flashing wristlets set with big chunks of shining radium ore. They were coming straight toward Pollock and Eve, with giant arms menacingly reaching out for them.

CHAPTER VI

WITH hissing screeches of wild panic, the two great lizards they rode reared wildly up at sight of the oncoming giant men. Pollock and Eve were flung violently from the saddles.

Pollock hit the reeds, and rolled over and over among them. As he did so, he heard a cry of agony from the girl. He glimpsed her lying amid the reeds nearby.

Stunned, he managed to scramble toward her. As he did so, the soft ground vibrated beneath him and he glimpsed the two incredible giants pursuing the fleeing lizards, with upraised spears.

One colossal stride carried the hundred-foot men past the reeds in which Pollock and Eve had been flung. They leaped easily over the half-buried space-ship!

Pollock found the girl lying, her face white with agony inside her helmet. "Eve, we've got to get out of here!" he said frantically. "They'll come back in a moment and hunt for us."

She tried to rise. But as she put her hand to the gound, she sank back with a little moan of pain. "My arm!"

Pollock was horrified to find that her shoulder had been dislocated by her violent fall. She was faint with the agony of it.

He looked wildly around. He had to find a better hiding place than this. Then his eye fell upon the nearby ship.

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The two colossi could not get into that!

He bent and picked up the fainting girl, and stumbled through the reeds toward the ship. Half-sunken in the soft ground as it was, its door was still above ground and was open. He staggered in with Eve and put her down on the floor of the mid-deck corridor.

He looked around. Green mold covered everything in the vessel. There was no sign that it had been occupied for a long time.

Though her face was pallid with pain, Eve also was trying to look around. "Alan?" she whispered.

"No sign of him here," said Pollock thickly. "Eve, they're coming back!"

The ship was quivering slightly to the returning vibration of huge footsteps. Through a porthole, Pollock glimpsed the titan figures of the two giant Neptunians approaching outside.

The two colossi were searching the reeds. He hoped they would not think of the ship. But it soon became evident that he had left tracks in the soft ground. For the two came toward the ship.

"They can't get in here," he told Eve, desperately. "They're far too huge to enter."

The giants bestrode the space-ship as though it were a toy craft! They stooped over it.

A hand, gigantic beyond all belief, reached in through the space-door. It groped back and forth along the mid-deck.

With a strangled cry, Pollock snatched up the girl and retreated to the end of the deck. His movement had apparently been heard. For now the hand snatched viciously toward him.

He drew his atom-pistol, levelled it and pulled trigger. There was no answering blast from the weapon. It was dead, useless.

Stunned by that disastrous discovery, Pollock crouched with Eve back in the farthest corner. The groping hand could not quite reach him. The giant could not get his upper arm through the door.

Presently the hand was withdrawn. He heard the booming of great voices, high overhead, like rolling thunder. Then the space-ship began to rock violently as the colossi tried to tear it out of the ground.

Pollock sweated with nightmare fear. If they got the ship unearthed, they could between them crack it open—

But apparently even the strength of the two colossi was not quite sufficient to tear the ship loose from its deep bed in the ground. They desisted the attempt. The thunderous voices rolled briefly. Then one of the giants strode rapidly away across the marsh.

The other remained, squatting purposefully outside the ship. The meaning of it was plain enough to Pollock.

"One of them has gone to get others," he said hoarsely. "Eve, this is a trap I've got you into."

"It's not your fault," she husked. "I insisted on coming along."

HER fine face was drawn with pain. He knew the hellish agony she must be suffering from the dislocated shoulder. And he could not, he found after examination, do anything with her shoulder without help.

Pollock felt all the sensations of a rat in a trap, awaiting death. If he only had something to fight with! Why had his atom-pistol proved useless?

Its tiny gauge showed that it contained a full charge of the "unstable" copper that was its fuel. Again he triggered, but it remained dead. He opened the butt. The fuel-chamber was empty.

"Good God, Lor Ow tricked us!" he exclaimed. "When he gave us back

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the atom-guns, he gave them to us empty except for just enough charge to fire one blast. He knew Marston would test the guns—once."

The diabolical cunning of the Venusian mutineer stunned him. He knew now why Lor Ow had agreed so readily to surrender.

"He and Thubar and the other mutineers, as soon as the cycs are completely repaired, will overpower the officers and seize the ship again! And the cycs are nearly finished *now!* We've got to get back and warn Marston—"

The hopelessness of their prospects of ever doing so struck him to silence. The giant Neptunian still crouched outside, ominously waiting. There was no possible escape from the ship.

Eve's face was pure white with agony, fine perspiration beading her forehead. Yet she tried to smile at him.

"Don't worry about me," she whispered. "If you can get away to warn the captain, do so."

"Do you think I'd leave you, after being crazy enough to let you come?" he flamed. "It's my fault—"

Her low exclamation of pain interrupted him. Her effort to turn and speak to him had wrung new torture from her twisted shoulder.

"Eve, listen!" he encouraged. "I haven't yet looked through this ship for soma. If I can find any, it will deaden your pain enough that you can move. We can try cutting out a port on the side of the ship away from that monster."

Pollock stumbled through the shadowy ship, toward the cabins in the stern. The medicine chest should be in one of them. And if there was soma in it—

Soma! Even in their present moment of dire peril, his brain and body cried out for it. It would steady his long-thirsty nerves, would bring him new strength and ease Eve's agony so that they could at least make an attempt to escape their terrible predicament.

Pollock's hands shook wildly when he found the medicine chest. He tore open the door. His gaze flew instantly to one small, sealed plastic flask of red liquor.

He snatched and gripped it as a drowning man might grip a straw, and looked for more. There was no more. He tore the contents of the chest wildly out, but without avail. This one little flask held all the soma in the ship.

"But it's not enough!" he told himself wildly. "It's barely enough for one person. If I give it to Eve—"

If he gave it to Eve, it would relieve the agony she was suffering. But it would leave not a drop of soma for himself.

And he had sweated, toiled and fought for days to get this precious little flask of the red liquor! He had dreamed of it, his body and nerves had cried out for it night and day. Give it up, now?

"I won't do it," he thought desperately. "I *can't* do it! I've got to have this for myself."

They were both almost certain to be killed soon, anyway, he told himself. Why should he give the soma to Eve, merely to save her a short period of agony before the almost inevitable end?

With death staring them in the face, he might as well die happy! Pollock unsealed the tiny flask and prepared to lift his helmet briefly so that he might raise the flask to his lips.

CHAPTER VII

HIS arm froze, without completing the movement. For he had again seen in front of him the pale, brave face of Eve Graham.

He couldn't drink the soma. He

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knew that, now. Not even the terrible mastery of the soma-drinking habit could force him to do so, when the liquid meant surcease of agony for the girl.

He stumbled back through the ship to his side. He was shaking from mental strain as he gently raised her in his arms.

"Eve, I found a little soma. It will anaesthetize your pain. But drink it only a few drops at a time, or it will put you to sleep."

He showed her how to lift her helmet and hold her breath momentarily while she drank. And as she did so, he held the flask to her lips, feeling a strange new calm.

Color came back into her face. She looked up at him gratefully, as she lowered her helmet back into position.

"That's killed the pain. I can move now—"

She stopped, looking at Pollock's haggard, strangely calm face. Her eyes became stricken.

"You gave me all the soma you found! You've nearly died for it, yet you gave it to me—"

"It doesn't matter, Eve," he said dully. "I don't need it that badly."

And as he said that, Pollock suddenly realized that what he said was *true*. He didn't feel now as though he needed the soma.

The wild craving of his nerves and brain for the Martian liquor had miraculously quieted from the moment he had made his decision.

"Eve," he said hoarsely. "I didn't believe what I said just now. But it's so! I don't feel now that I'll ever need soma again."

The explanation burst upon his thunderstruck brain. The only possible key to the miracle.

"I broke my *physical* body of the soma-habit, in all these weeks I've had to do without it! I sweated it out, as a few people have done before. But I didn't know I had. I still thirsted for the stuff as a *mental* habit—and my effort of will just now broke that!"

"I'm glad!" she cried, her eyes brimming. "No matter what happens, I'm glad!"

Pollock felt a soaring exultation, even in the midst of deathly danger. The grip that had strangled his life for two years was gone. He felt like a prisoner released. He might die, but he'd die clean!

But new, buoyant courage and hope tingled through him now. He wouldn't die if he could help it! They still had a slim chance—

"Eve, we've got to get out of this ship before the other giants come and rip this craft apart."

He looked from the porthole. The colossus still crouched outside, ominously waiting.

Pollock raced down to the moldering cyc-room of the vessel and came back with rusting tools. He sprang to a porthole on the side of the ship opposite the guarding giant.

"If we can cut a way out on this side, we'll have a chance to get away through the reeds. You take a few drops of the soma whenever the pain comes back."

HE TOILED at the thick double glassite of the porthole, the rusted points and edges of his tools only slowly eating into the tough material. Eve kept watch upon the crouching colossus on the other side. Pollock finally got the porthole cut through. He lifted out the sections of glassite and placed them softly on the floor.

"I'll go first, Eve, and lift you out," he whispered.

He slipped through the porthole. Half buried as the ship was, it was only

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a few feet to the soft ground.

A thunderous rolling of sound broke in the distance. Pollock turned, appaled. A group of five collossi were rapidly approaching through the marsh, and had glimpsed him dropping out of the ship.

"Eve, quickly! They're coming!" he yelled.

The girl lowered herself clumsily by one arm through the porthole. He snatched her to her feet.

The thunderous voices were shouting back and forth. The five oncoming colossi and the one on the other side of the ship were coming toward them.

"Into the reeds!" he cried frantically. "Eve, it's our only chance!"

The girl had inexplicably stopped. As though frozen by horror, she was staring wildly up at the oncoming six giants.

She was in full view of them. They had seen and were coming. Pollock knew he could not desert her, even though her frozen fascination of horror had cost them their last chance.

Mad with rage and the bitterness of defeat, he stepped in front of her and shook his fist at the oncoming monstrous shapes, like a Gulliver defying Brobdingnagians.

"Come on, then, damn you!" he shouted.

Eve ran past him, toward the striding colossi, her hands uplifted wildly to them.

"Alan!" she screamed.

And then, Pollock froze as he saw. Saw that the leader of these colossi was no giant Neptunian like the others.

He was a giant yes,—towering huge as the others, dressed like them in leather harness. But his features were those of a young Earthman, features strangely like those of Eve herself.

"Alan, it's you!" Eve was sobbing wildly.

Pollock reached her side, supported her as her knees buckled. The leader of the giants, towering titantic over them, was kneeling.

"It's my brother!" she sobbed. It's Alan!"

Alan Graham, the man who had flown this doomed ship to Neptune and whom she had come to seek—a *giant?"*

Pollock knew horror transcending anything he had yet experienced. Yet he should have been prepared for this, he thought. The radioactive fog of this hellish valley worked its terrible effect upon any living thing that breathed it —whether animal, Neptunian or Earthman.

"Eve! My God, how did you get here!" The words rolled down like shattering thunder from the giant kneeling over them.

Alarm flashed into his face. "You've got to get out of the valley, quickly! If your helmet leaks and you breathe this air, you're lost."

He extended his giant open hand toward them, palm upward. "Get into my hand, both of you."

Pollock, supporting the girl, stumbled up onto the colossal palm. He felt more strongly than ever that this must be sheer nightmare.

Alan Graham's hand cupped protectingly around them, then rushed dizzily up through the air as the giant Earthman rose to his feet.

He strode purposefully up the slope of the valley, the other giants following unquestioningly. Only when they had climbed up out of the poisonous radium fog of the valley into the clean mists of the lichen forest, did he put them down.

EVE and Pollock could take off their helmets here. And as they did so, Alan Graham again kneeled and his colossal face came down toward them.

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He was crying, great tears running down those giant cheeks. There was something terrible to Pollock in the spectacle of those tears.

"Eve!" his thunderous voice husked. "My kid sister Eve, come all the way to Neptune to look for me. And you find me, like this."

"Oh, Alan, how did it happen?" she sobbed.

He told them. "Our ship landed in the valley, the plotted location of the radium deposits we were seeking. But we crashed in landing in that glowing fog. The ship was damaged, some of us killed.

"We guessed from what we saw that to breathe that radioactive air would have terrible results. So we worked to repair the ship and wore helmets when we went out. But the radioactive poison got us. We hadn't suspected that the hull of the *Meteor* had been cracked underneath and was allowing the poisonous air to enter the ship.

"We didn't suspect, until we began to change. We began to *grow*. Day by day, week by week, our stature expanded. We had to get out of the ship before we became too big for it. And we knew then that we were doomed, anyway."

He made a hopeless gesture. "We've been here ever since. And in these months, after we grew to this giant size, I have been trying to help the other poor devils of giants whom we found here when we came, the Neptunians who were caught in this poisonous trap. I've been teaching them things, persuading them to stop raiding the little people of the cliffs, doing what I can to make their life more tolerable."

Pollock looked in awe at the other giants. They were all Neptunians, those other five. They were watching Alan Graham in reverence.

"You're going back to Earth with me!" Eve exclaimed desperately. "We'll find some way of bringing you back to normal size—"

Alan Graham shook his huge head sadly. "Nothing will ever do that, Eve. I know enough science to realize that this hyper-growth is a one-way process. And that means that I must stay on Neptune for life, for no ship is big enough to take me away."

He went on rapidly. "But *you* must get away from this hell's planet, at once. Where is your ship?"

Pollock answered. "It's near the cliff of the little tribes. But I'm afraid it may go without us!"

He explained swiftly about the mutineers and the trick of Lor Ow with the atom-pistols.

"The cycs are repaired now, the ship able to take off," Pollock finished hoarsely. "I fear that Lor Ow and his band will seize control and leave when they find us two missing, for they'll know that I would discover their trick with the guns if I ran into danger."

Alan Graham's thunderous voice rang with decision. "Then we've got to get you to your craft without delay! I can deal with your mutineers!"

He extended his hand. "This is the quickest way! You could never keep up with us."

He cupped his hands protectingly around them again as they stepped back onto it. Straightening up, holding his hand carefully in front of him, Alan Graham uttered a thunderous word to the other giants.

They started through the lichen- forests, towering above the tallest of the growths, crushing down the smaller ones beneath their giant strides. Daylight had come, and in the mistly light the spectacle of the six hurrying colossi was one that stunned Pollock's brain.

Crouching in that huge, swaying palm, his arms around Eve's shoulders, he looked forth incredulously at

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the speed with which the foggy forest fell behind them. Until he died, Pollock would not forget that hastening of the giants through the strengthening dawn.

He thought, finally, that they must be near the *Ceres*. And then between the giant strides, he heard a distant sound in the fog.

"That's rockets blasting!" he yelled wildly to the colossal Earthman who carried them. "The *Ceres* must be taking off now!"

ALAN GRAHAM rushed forward, heedless of all obstacles, his legs crashing through the great lichen trees as a man might through reeds.

The roar of rockets blasted louder to their ears. They came into sight of the space-ship. And Pollock yelled again, for the *Ceres* was taking off with keel and stern rockets flaming, rushing up toward them in a long slanting climb.

"The mutineers have the ship and they've got away!" he groaned.

"I can *still* stop them!" shouted Alan Graham.

His hand swooped dizzyingly to put Pollock and Eve down behind a big lichen on the ground. And then, straightening, Graham charged forward.

He charged straight toward the climbing space-ship! It was rushing up toward him like a thunderbolt of metal. The colossal Earthman leaped up directly in front of it.

The prow of the *Ceres* tore deep into his throat. Eve screamed as her colossal brother staggered beneath that mortal wound.

But he was gripping and holding the bow of the ship with terrible, dying strength! And the other giants, roaring with deafening, raging voices, were springing forward to help him.

Their enormous arms circled the ship, and pulled it down to the ground by brute strength! And as the prow was torn out of his throat, Alan Graham swayed, staggered and then fell like a crashing oak.

Eve shook free of Pollock's grip and ran toward the giant's prostrate form. Pollock, starting to follow, saw the door of the *Ceres* open and glimpsed Lor Ow leap forth.

The Venusian ringleader, his face wild and dazed, saw Pollock and raised his atom-pistol. Before he could fire, the giant foot of one of the colossal Neptunians came down upon him.

Thubar and the others, who had started to follow Lor Ow out, ran back into the ship screaming. But Pollock hastened after Eve.

He found her beside the head of her giant, fallen brother. Alan Graham's great eyes rolled toward them, in a dying flicker of strength.

"Better this way, Evie," he husked. "Don't be too sorry for me—"

And he was dead with the words, and Eve was sobbing wildly against Pollock's chest. He tried to soothe her.

"He was right, Eve. He'd always have been a prisoner here on Neptune."

HE WENT back with her toward the ship. Marston and Lewis were emerging from it now, their faces wild with incredulity also as they looked up at the Neptunian colossi.

"Pollock!" cried the captain. "I still can't understand! Lor Ow and his bunch overpowered us this morning, and were taking off. They kept us alive because they still figured to torture one of us into navigating for them. But then these giants appeared—"

Pollock interrupted the dazed captain. "You've got the mutineers under complete control now?"

Marston nodded grimly. "Thubar and the other two ringleaders are locked

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safely up this time. They lost their nerve completely and released us just now, and that's the first thing I did. And *this* time I made sure our atom-guns were not empty."

The Neptunian colossi had left the *Ceres* and were approaching their fallen leader. They bent over the prostrate giant.

Pollock saw the sorrow in the faces of those incredible figures. He saw them debate briefly among themselves.

"Pollock, what if they—," Marston began fearfully.

"They won't harm us," Pollock answered quietly. "That's Alan Graham, and he was their beloved leader and they know we were his friends."

The five colossi straightened. Two of them had picked up Alan Graham's stupendous body between them.

Bearing it, never looking back, the five giants strode away through the mists. They disappeared in the fog northeastward.

Eve looked after them with tear-filled eyes. "They're going to bury him," he told her, his throat tight.

She nodded. And her voice was choked as she called into the mist. "Alan! Alan, goodbye!"

Marston's urgent voice recalled them to the immediate present. "For God's sake let's get off this devil's world!"

A little later, with Marston at the controls, the *Ceres* again lifted from the lichen forest and climbed through the mist on roaring rockets. It swung out through the foggy atmosphere until at last the clear vault of space with the hosts of brilliant stars burst on their vision.

Pollock went tiredly down to help old Stacy check the cycs. They would be shorthanded all the way back to Earth, he knew. But they would make it.

He found Marston talking with Eve when he went back to the bridge. The burly captain spoke casually to him.

"Mr. Lewis will take the next watch while you get some sleep. Then you will take over after him, Mr. Pollock."

"*Mr.* Pollock?" he repeated wonderingly. It had been long since that formal address of officer to officer had met his ears.

Marston nodded calmly. "I'm appointing you temporary officer, since Harker is disabled. And I'm betting that when I tell the Board all I've just heard, you get your certificate back. When you do, I'd like to have you with me permanently."

Pollock swallowed. It was too much to take, almost. His self-respect, his job, his future—all coming back to him together.

"I—I'd be happy to serve with you, sir," he managed.

"Good, that's a promise," rumbled the captain.

And Pollock, looking into Eve's tremulous, happy eyes, saw there another promise.

THE IRON MEN OF VENUS

(*Continued from page* 45)

monster. He could not go on spreading death and ruin. "For the sake of those innocent people I'm looking down upon, for the sake of the country I love, I must end it..."

"Lanny was a good boy," Dynamo said. "We're going to miss him."

"He was a swell kid; one of my favorite brothers," Joe said.

THE END

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LUNAR LEGACY

(*Concluded from page* 55)

which he was clinging, straight at Bradley. It was such a complete surprise that Bradley's shot, fired by instinct, went wild. Then it was too late. Ran was on him, wrenching the weapon from the man. Bradley let it go too easily.

In a flash he had whipped something from his side. Ran made a lunge to grab his pistol arm. He seized it and the two men struggled across the pit-floor trying to knock each other down. Ran clung firmly to the gun arm. Twice Bradley fired but the bullets went wild.

June circled wildly, trying to get in a blow or shot at Bradley but the combatants were too close to permit it. Ran managed to twist Bradley's arm just as he squeezed the trigger again. Bradley's suit collapsed in a dead heap as the air oozed out of it.

As Bradley collapsed, Ran pinched the two holes that the bullet had made in his suit, thus managing to keep the man alive.

Together June and Ran patched the suit with rubber patching equipment. Then they dragged Bradley out of the pit.

When Ran reached the ship, he called the patrol and a rocket was soon winging its way over the barren landscape. After tying up Bradley, then, and only then, did he and June indulge in the luxury of removing their space-suits.

"June," Ran said awkwardly, "you look very lovely."

The girl pretended astonishment. "I?" she said. "Oh heavens, no. Wait until I get dressed and cleaned up before you start flipping compliments at me. I've spent more time in a space suit with you than I have at more formal functions." She laughed. "This has been pretty rich for my blood."

"Believe me, June," Ran agreed, "I haven't found it easy going either." But there was a smile on his face as he said, "Do you think you'll like associating with a millionaire?"

"Who knows?" June laughed, "I'll have to know a lot more about him."

"You will!" Ran declared fervently, "you will."

THE END

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THE

The horror had been waiting with the patience of evil itself

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CURSE

By Ivar Jorgensen

The terror had to be dealt with. But the only method of blocking it, meant a trip into living hell for a tortured man

I MET THE man in Chicago. I was on an overnight stop with the choice of two time-killers near my hotel: the gaudy, rather overdone cocktail lounge or a recital hall I'd noticed on the boulevard while coming from the station. I chose the music—a pianist named Roger Godfrey according to the outside billing—bought my ticket and went in to hear some very good Bach.

I had a loge seat and, as the intermission lights bloomed up, I looked around to find only one other occupied seat in the loge.

He was a small, wispy man with a goatee, very bright, black eyes, and a smile filled with warmth. He lost no time in breaking the ice. "I see you, too, are alone."

"Just passing through with an evening to fill."

"An admirable way to fill it. Would you care to join forces with me at the bar?"

"It would be a pleasure."

As we moved down the stairs toward the foyer, he turned on me suddenly with that quick disarming smile. "An advertising man?"

"No, a writer. Pretty much of a hack, I'm afraid—as writers go."

We got elbow room at the bar and ordered old-fashioneds. "Ah—you writing fellows! A typewriter, a sheet of paper, a fact. You start weaving—building—and presto! Out comes the salable property."

I smiled. "I never heard it expressed quite like that before—"

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He had a way of throwing one off-balance with a quick movement of his head. "Tell me—what do you think of Roger Godfrey?"

"Why—quite accomplished I'd say, but I'm not much of a musical critic."

"Did you notice anything extraordinary about him?"

I considered. "Frankly, no."

The man sobered. "A remarkable man, Godfrey. One of my dearest friends. A remarkable man who went in and out of hell—and I mean that literally—with a courage seldom seen on this earth. But a modest man. Close-mouthed."

A peculiar intensity had come on my drinking friend. He sipped his old-fashioned, tapped a handkerchief to his lips, and said, "Roger Godfrey's story is an appalling thing. It is a stark revelation of how close we dwell—all of us—to brain-searing horror. I'd like to tell you that story."

"I'd be delighted to listen."

He glanced at his watch. "It won't take long. We have fully ten minutes. It began on the day Roger Godfrey became convinced he was—"

"—going *blind*. Oh Roger! Don't say a thing like that!"

Godfrey lowered his hands from his eyes, got up from the piano bench and stood for a moment, swaying. Margaret got swiftly up from her chair and came toward him. His smile was a weak attempt to cover anxiety. "Maybe—maybe it's just overwork, darling. I don't know."

"But you never mentioned it, Roger. I didn't dream there was anything wrong with your eyes."

"It's come on rather suddenly."

"But what is it? What do you feel?"

"Maybe it's just foolishness—"

"Roger!"

"Oh, I don't know. It's as though my eyes were turning hard—hard as marbles. Terrific shooting pains and moments when I can't see! Not blackouts. It isn't black or white or anything else. Suddenly looking through my eyes is like trying to look with my fingers—or my teeth. Sight just isn't there. Then it comes back, but the pain doesn't go."

"And you haven't been to a specialist? Roger, you're insane!"

Roger Godfrey took Margaret by the shoulders and drank her in as though he had to get a lifetime's seeing into the next few moments. "No, darling," he said. "I'm afraid. Deathly afraid. I love you. I can't bear to think of looking at you only—with my hands!"

He was an artist and not a man of strong will. She took him in her arms and strove to comfort him. "It's probably overwork, as you say. Nothing to worry over. Fifty years ago perhaps, but not now. Science has made tremendous strides. They understand such things."

He felt a little ashamed of himself. He kissed her and smiled. "Science? It doesn't even know how to get rid of the common cold."

But he was only joking, and together they sought out one of the great eye specialists: Dr. Michael Wellington.

Margaret sat in an anteroom while Roger went through minute and exhaustive checks and tests. When she was called in Wellington gave them both a smile of encouragement.

"There is no great cause for worry," he said. "The case is—well, not exactly routine, but it should certainly respond to surgery."

"An operation?"

"Yes. As soon as possible. Fortunately we've caught it in time. Mr. Godfrey will be as good as ever in a couple of months."

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THE OPERATION was performed and, a week later, Roger was released from the hospital. When he and Margaret thanked the great surgeon, their attitude was little short of worship. He accepted it gracefully and accepted also a wedding invitation for a month hence.

But only two weeks had passed before Roger Godfrey reeturned to Wellington's office. Wellington was startled at the musician's appearance. "Godfrey! What on earth?"

Roger Godfrey was pale and worn. He'd lost weight and his eyes shone with the brightness of fever. He moved with a studied deliberation like a man making a visible effort to hold himself together. He sat down opposite Wellington and asked, "Doctor—what did you do to my eyes?"

Wellington was caught somewhat off guard by the tense, urgent tone. "Why—why I operated in order to correct—"

"What was wrong with my eyes, Doctor?"

"The technical terms are rather hard for a layman to understand."

"At the time you mentioned glaucoma, but you said that wasn't exactly it."

"That's true. You were the victim of a disease which, as I said at the time, could easily have been mistaken for glaucoma. The symptoms and appearances were much the same. But—"

"Doctor—was the disease a rare one?"

"As a matter of fact—yes. I've only seen three cases like it in all my professional life."

"Did you operate on them?"

"Upon only one."

"And what happened?"

"The operation was a success."

"That's not what I mean. What happened later?"

"I really can't say. It was a clinical case. In Alexandria, Egypt. The hospital there wired me and I went there because I was greatly interested. The patient was an Arab. Frankly I don't know what happened to him."

Godfrey was trembling. He laughed now and there was a touch of hysteria in the laugh. "I think I can tell you what happened to him, Doctor."

Wellington got up from his chair and quickly approached the pianist. But the latter waved him away. "I'm all right. I'm all right. Just listen to me. There's something I've got to tell you."

"Very well. I'm listening."

"When you operated on my eyes, Doctor, you opened the windows to hell!"

Slowly, Wellington took off his glasses. "What are you saying, man? I don't understand you."

Godfrey had now gotten some semblance of a grip on himself. He leaned back, wan, beaten, weary to the bone. When he spoke, his near-hysteria had vanished. "I can't give it to you in a word, Doctor. It will take a little telling. Be patient with me and listen."

"Certainly, but first I'll get you something to steady your nerves."

Godfrey waved an impatient hand. "At first," he said, "I noticed nothing. There was only the elation at my escape from blindness. I was walking on air. I began practicing again and never played so brilliantly. Then something happened."

"Tell me."

"It was a little over a week ago when Margaret and I were having a cocktail in my apartment before going to the recital hall. I had just kissed her and drawn away when a voice said, *"We've got to kill her."*

"A voice. Whose voice?"

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"A voice inside me."

"I see."

Godfrey sat up sharply. "Now, Doctor. Don't start jumping to conclusions. You don't even begin to see. That voice was real, although only I myself could hear it. It was not an unspoken thought and it did not come from me. It came from the beast!"

QUICKLY Wellington weighed the thing and decided on a course of action. Let Godfrey talk it out. Help him talk it out. "I'm afraid you'll have to clarify that."

"I'll do my best. And don't send for the straight-jacket until I've finished." Godfrey smiled weakly. "Will you promise?"

"You have no worry on that score."

"When a man if afflicted with the curse visited upon me, Doctor, nature furnishes a small compensation. This comes in the form of understanding. It's not the same as a purely physical affliction such as the one I brought to you. When man is called upon to look into the depths of hell, complete knowledge of that hell comes along with it."

"You were saying something about a beast—and a voice."

"Yes. There is a beast in every human being, Doctor Wellington."

The surgeon made a show of considering. "I know that Man, in a sense, has two natures—"

"Man has more than that! He is two separate beings. The talk of dualism is merely a symbol of the true state of man. Inside of you and me and every one of us, there is a demon—a thing out of hell trapped behind our will power—and other restraints."

"Very well. I'll grant you that—"

"You're not granting me that at all!"

Wellington frowned. His voice took on an edge. "You'll do me the courtesy of believing the statements I make. Now what has this demon got to do with the operation I performed on you?"

"The eyes, Doctor Wellington, have been called the windows of the soul. That's a little flowery but it doesn't go far enough. The eyes are the windows—the barred windows to all that man really is—his brain. The demon dwells in there and looks out through the bars—"

"Now really!"

"Wait a minute. Maybe I can explain it this way. All the baser desires and impulses are reflected through the eyes. You look at a beautiful woman and you desire her. And in your eyes are the things you would not want revealed. You look at an enemy, and in your eyes is reflected the urge to kill—to rend—to cause agony. But these things are seldom done because the demon—the beast—is trapped. It can only suggest. It cannot come forth and do these things itself."

"You're suggesting that I—"

"I'm not suggesting. I'm telling you. That operation may have saved my sight but it opened the windows to the beast! You cut the bars. Now I hold it back only by vigilance—only by will power. I tell you the windows through which the beast can escape are open."

ROGER GODFREY sank back on his chair and closed his eyes. As Wellington regarded him silently, he went on speaking. "I'm sure the Bible refers to this in a symbolic manner. When Christ went with Satan up to the mountain. There Christ wrestled with his demon."

Wellington tapped his glasses

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thoughtfully on the arm of his chair. Godfrey spoke with infinite weariness. "Christ had the divine strength to vanquish His demon. I haven't."

The surgeon regarded the pianist with a clinical interest. A full minute of silence passed. Then Wellington spoke. "You said this demon suggested killing your fiancee. Is she the sole object of its hatred?"

Roger answered indirectly. "Poets and artists," he said, "have a way of sensing truth that less highly attuned people overlook. No doubt you've read Wilde's classic—*The Ballad of Reading Gaol?* 'Each man kills the thing he loves.' The beast will concentrate upon Margaret. Then—when it is finally free—" Rodger shrugged. "Only God knows."

"Have you told Margaret about this?"

"No."

"Then let's go and tell her. You are certainly going to need the help of the one closest to you."

Roger Godfrey had turned listless. Wellington called the cab and they crossed town to Godfrey's apartment. Once inside, Godfrey looked at his watch. "Margaret will be here in half an hour."

A bright fire was crackling in the grate. In order to be occupied, he seized the poker and began working the fire. Then he dropped the poker and straightened.

"This is wrong. I mustn't see Margaret. I must never see her again."

"On the contrary," Wellington said, as he took a cigar from his case. "You love the girl. This beast of yours will drag you to her sooner or later. It's better that she knows."

Godfrey leaned suddenly toward the surgeon. There was an eagerness in his manner. "You believe me! You *do* believe me, don't you?"

"Let's assume that I do," Wellington replied quietly.

Margaret arrived soon after that. When the bell rang, Wellington got quickly to his feet. "Let me."

He crossed to the door and opened it. The girl got halfway in, then reacted to the surgeon's unexpected presence. A look of fear came. "Doctor? Is anything wrong?"

"Of course not, my dear. Just a friendly visit. I wanted to see how my prize patient is coming along."

Margaret laughed with obvious relief. She shrugged out of her coat before Wellington could help her and moved swiftly to where Roger was standing with his back to the fire. She said, "Darling, you should be resting for the recital," and raised her mouth for a kiss.

Then Wellington saw it. The hideous monster crowding suddenly between the two lovers—coming as in a mist from Roger's eyes to form into solid substance. The black bestial face—the scaly hands of shining ebony grasping Margaret's throat.

He heard Roger's scream—Margaret's scream—against the background of a slobbering snarl of hatred.

Then Roger Godfrey bent and snatched up the poker still extended into the bright fire.

MY NEW-FOUND friend had continued his story as we made our way up the stairs. He was interrupted by the dimming of the house lights, the bright spotlight settling on the stage entrance.

Roger Godfrey walked from the wings onto the stage and toward the concert grand.

Under the cover of applause, my friend leaned close to me and said, "Don't you notice it now? The stiff walk. The head held high. He's stone

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blind, you know. Been that way since the moment he seized the red-hot poker and—"

The applause crescendoed, annoying me. I leaned closer.

"And what?"

"—closed the windows."

Godfrey began playing but I couldn't get my mind in it. My interest lay in the man by my side. I leaned close enough to whisper. "That doctor—that Wellington. He'd had such a case before and he'd have stayed to study it. So he must have known. He must have gotten some diabolical personal pleasure out of—"

The man turned to me. "I assure you he did not know. Pray let me correct an oversight and introduce myself. I am Michael Wellington, surgeon and eye specialist."

I was somewhat flustered. "Sorry," I muttered, and sank back into my seat.

Godfrey's brilliant music welled up from the stage and after a few moments, Wellington again leaned toward me. "They are always together," he said. "She brings him to the recital halls; waits for him in the wings during the performance. If you ever catch sight of the pair, notice the scarf she wears close about her throat. She is never without it. The scarf covers the livid scars on her throat."

I kept my eyes on Wellington, entirely fascinated. And as I watched him, I was mortally certain a change came over his features. A frightening change—and he sat there like some fiend looking with satisfaction upon a finished and diabolical handiwork.

BUT THAT was not the end of it. I couldn't get Wellington out of my mind, so when chance held me in town another day, I called at the hotel he'd mentioned during the recital. I asked the clerk for Dr. Michael Wellington.

He looked at the register and replied, "There is no Doctor Wellington registered."

"Then he must have checked out. He was here last night."

"The register shows no such name. I'm sorry."

I was somewhat annoyed. "A small, dark man—with black eyes and a black goatee."

The clerk's face cleared. "Oh, yes. A man of that description checked out this morning. We know him quite well. You must be referring to Frank Gorman, a fur salesman, who stops here quite regularly."

I remembered snatches of conversation. And I understood. *Ah—you writing fellows. A typewriter....a fact. You start weaving—building....*

Fact: A pianist named Roger Godfrey was blind.

I should have known better because I've met them before—people who enjoy showing you they can do your job much better than you can do it yourself.

And sometimes they can.

THE END

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Continued from page 69

would change it before blasting-off."

"And they let you go?"

"They thanked me and let me go."

Drake took her arm gently and they walked along the silent street together, their slow footsteps sounding hollowly in the clammy night.

"It's like a miracle," Drake said softly. "All the treachery, all the evil, all the cunning that went into their plans. And it didn't do a bit of good. It's like a miracle."

The girl was silent.

"It makes me think there's a chance after all," Drake said, suddenly laughing.

"A chance for what?"

"I'll be damned if I know," he said. "Just a chance. Vanya, may I buy you a drink?"

"Yes, if you like."

"There's just one thing." Drake stopped and pulled the wad of Venusian money from his pocket. The money he'd got from Arish. He removed one bill, and then, with a savagely joyful gesture he ripped the money into bits and threw it to the greedy hands of the wind. He put the bill he had saved back in his pocket.

"It's only right that they buy this drink," he said.

He took Vanya's arm again and they walked swiftly toward a cluster of lights at the end of the street.

THE END

Continued from page 79

where in the infinity of blackness that stretched overhead was a frightened, lonely kid whom I had never understood before tonight. I thought of him now, still alive, scared and alone in the cabin of the ship, watching the small, blue globe of home fade into a pinpoint of light in the distance. A spot of light he wouldn't be able to tell from the millions of others in the sky.

I had never understood Mark. But then I had never understood dreams and ideals and those who were willing to die for them until tonight.

I looked at the moon, still full except for a slim sliver off its edge, and suddenly realized that dreams don't necessarily die with the dreamer. Some day another kid would try again—and someday he would make it. Some day a kid like Mark would hold the stars in his hands.

THE END

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PROUD ASTEROID

By Paul W. Fairman

There was no life at all on this planet—nothing animal or vegetable. Nothing alive, that is, except maybe the planet itself . . .

QUITE a stir was caused when the *Sir Francis Drake* turned up one morning over Chicago and signaled for landing instructions. This because the *Drake* had been long since given up for lost. It was one of Morton Parnell's ships out on research exploration somewhere under Orion, and old Parnell had already collected the insurance.

And now, here came the *Drake*, nineteen months overdue, nosing into the Chiport with hardly enough power left to make the ramp. So the *Drake's* arrival became top news.

But that was only the beginning. The real consternation was generated when they found Joe Haney, the pilot, had brought her in all by himself.

There were indications of the true

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This couldn't be real! The earth seemed to have parted, and thick lips were sucking up Fleeson!

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situation at Flight Control when the *Drake* sounded in and then went wandering off into space again.

Monson, a cadet serving on radar, got the *Drake's* sounding, plotted a course, and then watched open-mouthed as the ship hooked over and started toward Luna. He called Cartwright, the jet officer. Cartwright watched the *Drake* execute a weird loop, stand on her nose ten thousand miles out, before he called Spencer, the top brass.

Spencer watched the gymnastics of the ship like one bemused. "Out of control, evidently."

"No, sir," Monson said. "We took a spectrum on the jet fire. Pretty weak but still hot enough. She should ride in."

"Very well—send out a couple of power bugs."

It might not have been smart, but it was an order. After Spencer left, Cartwright put it through and sat shaking his head. "The way that crate's bouncing around it'll knock those bugs to hell and gone before they can grab on."

"We can only hope for the best, sir," Monson said.

They hoped for the best and got it. The grubby little power bugs nosed up into the *Drake's* irrational orbit like a pair of well-trained bird dogs. They sat on their jets until exactly the right moment and then shot in on either side of the space behemoth to get their gravity plates tight to her sides.

Even then she gave them quite a battle. It was like a pair of minnows landing a four-foot bass, but they hauled her down and booted her groundside with a skill that eventually got the two pilots a citation. Then everybody ran in as close as possible and waited for the crew to quit ship.

They waited quite a while. Finally a single hatch opened up and there was Joe Haney, a pale, hollow-cheeked waste of a man who looked far more dead than alive.

Spencer, always up front for this sort of thing, poked out a cordial hand. "Welcome back! Great to see you—it really is! The rest all right?"

Joe Haney stared at the proffered hand but made no move to take it. His voice—when it came—was a throaty mutter. "The rest are dead—all dead. I'm the only one left. Brought her in myself. Had a hell of a time—a hell of a time."

He walked down the ramp, brushing people aside with a swimming motion—a breast stroke against a heavy current. Then he turned, as though for information, and found Cartwright close behind him. Spencer had been lost in the shuffle.

"Is Morton Parnell still alive?"

IT WAS a logical question. Parnell had been an old man four years back—on the day the *Drake* jetted out on exploration. An old man and a rich one. The expedition—five and a half millions over-all cost—had been Parnell's financial baby in its entirety. Not a philanthropy, however. Parnell stood to make ten million even though the expedition was only moderately successful.

"Yes," Cartwright replied. "And he'll certainly be mighty glad to see you."

Haney turned and resumed pushing through the crowd but with Cartwright now beside him. "There's no point in his being glad," Haney said dully.

"But, man! You came back. You brought the ship back—all alone."

"Nothing in the ship—expedition a total loss—a big zero."

But Cartwright, of course, insisted upon being cheerful. "Still a great feat, Haney. An epic thing. In the rush, I doubt if anyone thought to contact Parnell, but we'll call right

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away. You're in a hurry to see him, no doubt."

Cartwright glanced now at the pitiful exhausted figure beside him. "That is," he added hurriedly, "after you've been looked over by a doctor and had some rest."

"I'm quite all right. I don't need a doctor and I'm not tired."

"But, you—"

"Haven't anything for Parnell yet, either. No report. Have to make out a report right away."

Cartwright laid a sympathetic arm across Haney's shoulders but the latter drew away and began repeating himself. "No report yet. Want a hotel room—a typewriter. Have to write out a report. Then I'll see Parnell."

But when they arrived at the flight office, Parnell had already been contacted and was on the phone. A clerk looked wide-eyed at Haney, entirely conscious of the history-making components in this affair. "He wants to talk to you," the clerk said reverently.

Haney took the phone. He said hello, and everyone in the room could hear the brittle, clipped words of the great industrialist coming over the wire.

"Haney?"

"Yes sir."

"They tell me you brought the *Drake* in."

"Yes sir."

"All alone?"

"Yes sir."

"What happened to the others?"

"I'll put that down in my report."

"Tell me, man! What happened to them?"

I don't feel like talking—I'd rather write it so everything is accurate. I'll get right at it."

"Damn it—don't be so hide-bound. I'm Parnell! That was my expedition. I'm asking you questions."

"It will all be in my report, sir."

And Cartwright, watching Haney, thought: *The way he looks around. The dullness of him. He doesn't look at all as though he's glad to be back.*

Parnell's snort of anger rattled over the phone. "What about cargo? What did you bring in? Did the expedition pay off in uranium?"

"No sir."

"Lorium? Cadmium?"

"No sir."

"Damn it! Did the expedition pay off in anything?"

"No sir. I'll explain it all in my report."

And Haney hung up on Parnell—put down the phone and turned to Cartwright. "If you'd take me to a hotel now—where I can get a room and a typewriter."

"Of course—of course." The jet officer took real pleasure in rushing Haney away before Spencer could shoulder through the packed crowd outside and take over. They got Haney into a cab and rushed him to the Chicago House where he registered and inquired again for a typewriter.

CARTWRIGHT went upstairs with him, but on arriving at the room, Haney closed the door on both Cartwright and the bellboy.

"I'm sorry," Haney said. "I must make out my report."

Cartwright went away dissapointed. "I've got as much curiosity as the next one. I've got to find out what happened."

But Cartwright never did find out. That was the last time he ever saw Haney and the report was not circulated.

It was certainly a strange document Haney put together in that room of the Chicago House. He sat down at the typewriter and did not move from his chair for eleven hours.

Nor did he rest when the report was finished. Instead he folded it carefully,

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put it in his pocket, and phoned Morton Parnell. As it was three-thirty in the morning, Parnell could not justly be censured for his gruffness.

"I'm ready to see you now, sir," Haney said.

"Well, that's damn courteous of you! Damn courteous indeed! I suppose you want me to get out of bed and come to your hotel?"

"That won't be necessary, sir. I'll be glad to come to you."

Parnell swallowed his anger because he—like Cartwright—had as healthy a curiosity as the next one, plus a large financial stake in this affair. "All right. I'll be waiting for you."

"Thank you, sir."

Haney left the hotel by a side door, skirting the lobby where a group of heavy-eyed reporters waited patiently. He caught a cab and drove north and up under the huge porte-cochere of Parnell's mansion. Parnell himself opened the door. There was a certain grim satisfaction in the tycoon's manner.

"Well—at last I'm privileged to find out what happened to my money. Nice of you to come around. I appreciate it. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions now?"

"It won't be necessary, sir—that is, it shouldn't. I believe everything is thoroughly covered in my report. However, I'll sit by while you read it. Then if you have any inquiries—"

Parnell snorted and led the pilot to a small study on the second floor. Haney sank into a richly upholstered easy chair and seemed grateful for the comfort.

And now, for a time, Parnell ignored Haney. He also dropped into a chair—under a reading lamp—and thumbed through the pages of Haney's report. He scowled at it and began to read swiftly. In fact he only skimmed the part which had to do with the outbound portion of the ill-fated trip. That would be—and was—quite routine. Only after several pages, did he settle back, forget his own dark frown, and read with marked concentration.

AND IT looked as though we had really struck paydirt (Haney's report read), because this asteroid was a good thousand miles in diameter and appeared to be made of solid ore. As I eased in, Captain Martin stood beside the control table and studied the rock surface through binoculars. I watched his face and saw the grin as though he were already banking the bonus he'd get for finding this huge floating ore deposit.

"Looks good, Joe," he said. "Can you come in closer and sit back on the jets?"

I put the ship into a tight circle and then pulled her back until we were practically standing still over the asteroid.

"It's the McCoy, son, the McCoy," Martin crooned. "Set her down and we'll get to work."

While I was picking out a level surface and bringing her in, Martin called First Scientist Neilson up from his laboratory. Neilson hurried forward and Martin gave him the glasses. Martin asked, "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry Neilson studied the asteroid for a few minutes and then said, "It's a cinch we'll need gravs and there isn't a cupful of air within five million miles."

"And probably no gases, either," Martin added.

"We'll see—we'll see," and Neilson went back to his lab to get ready for the preliminary surveys.

They were completed fifteen minutes after I set the ship on a flat down-slant near a ridge of boulders that seemed to form a backbone for the asteroid.

"No atmosphere," Neilson said. "No gases—no vegetation—no animal life."

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He looked pensively out the pilot's window. "Apparently a complete absence of everything except solid rock."

But Captain Martin was jubilant. "Maybe so," he said, "but if we could throw a chain around this lump and haul it back, the price of uranium would drop to fifteen cents a ton."

Neilson shrugged. He seemed nervous and uneasy. In his hand he carried a piece of the rock he'd chipped off and pulled in with a grappling arm.

"This stuff is funny. It—"

Martin scowled. "What do you mean? Isn't it ore-bearing?"

"I haven't run those tests. But I'm sure—as you say—this asteroid is priceless. Yet—"

"Then what's bothering you?"

Neilson was a fussy little man who excited easily. "I don't know! If I knew I'd tell you. Give me a chance to work it over. Right now it's just a feeling I have. The stuff—"

He broke off in the middle of a sentence and started toward the door—back to his laboratory. He was staring at the piece of rock in his hand and he almost tripped over the doorsill.

Martin said, "Neilson's getting to be more of an old woman every day," and then forgot about the scientist. "Haney, you're in command until I get back. I'm taking a landing party out."

I would have given a lot to go with that party, but I didn't ask permission. It would have been useless because there is a regulation that says the pilot and the captain cannot quit ship at the same time. One of them must remain aboard and I was elected.

Martin picked Sam Nixon, an astrogator—Leary, from the laboratory—and a jet wiper named Fleeson with shoulders like a dock heaver. They all got into their suits and floated out through the safety lock like four ugly birds without wings. I watched them through the pilot's window, envying them. They pushed up along the boulder ridge and disappeared over the top of it.

That was the last we heard of them for three hours, although I waited in the radio room hoping Martin would contact us.

NIGHT CAME. It lasted two hours and vanished. The blue sun that serviced this galaxy stood straight overhead when they returned. But only three of them. One was missing. This was an amazing thing—that a landing party would come back without the body of a fallen member. We got them in through the air-lock and pulled off their helmets.

Fleeson was missing.

Nixon was deathly sick and had made a mess of his suit from vomiting. Leary stared straight ahead, white-faced. He was like a limp doll as we took him out of his suit.

Martin, too, looked like a man who had gone through a soul-testing experience. He turned his eyes on me and said, "The God-damned asteroid's alive. It ate Fleeson."

There were five of us in the room and I remember the long moment of silence; five faces turned on Martin as he sat there with glazed eyes staring at me as though I was a mirror in which he saw the past few hours and couldn't believe them.

He had more than that to tell of course and after a while he began talking again. "It looked good out there—like the jackpot you hunt all your life but never expect to find. We went over the ridge with our guns ready and on down the other side. After a while, though, we put the guns away because it was silly to keep them in our hands. Not so much as the smallest bug moved anywhere.

"After a preliminary survey, we began scouting around for a likely place to load the hull. And we found it

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too. The asteroid is solid ore so it was just a matter of a good geographical setup. That was what we located—a wide, flat arena for the ship, right up against the hill of boulders where the grinding arms could reach right up and powder the boulders and pour them right into the hull."

Martin stopped talking. I waited a while before urging him on. "Then what happened?" I asked.

"Then Fleeson sat down. He must have been tired. He picked a level spot and went down on his haunches to rest."

Martin stopped again.

"Go ahead."

"You probably won't believe us, but the rock opened up and swallowed him."

"A volcanic action of some kind? The surface split underneath him and he fell in?"

Martin scowled at me as though I'd doubted his word. His look accused me of calling him a liar. "No, damn it! It was like I said! No eruption of any kind. No movement except in that one spot. And it was no fissure splitting open. It was a mouth I tell you! That rock opened exactly the way the mouth of an animal would open and when Fleeson tumbled inside, it closed just the way a mouth would close—two lips coming together—two jaws tightening up.

"Then, after Fleeson had been swallowed, there was no break in the rock whatever—no sign of the tiniest split in its surface. I tell you this asteroid is a living monster and we just saw it eat a man!"

RIGHT HERE—right at this spot—it was as though the thing had been staged and was being played out for an audience because there was another long moment of silence and First Scientist Neilson rushed into the ready-room. He was too full of his own news to see anything out of the ordinary. He blurted, "Captain! Captain! I've discovered an amazing thing! This asteroid is alive!"

And for a climax, Martin threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You're telling us," he choked. "You're telling us about it now. But it's not news any more, Harry. We just saw it eat its dinner."

It was nervous tension—nerves rubbed raw by the stark horror of what they had seen. Each of them reacted differently, but they were all victims of shock.

Neilson, now predominantly the scientist, hardly heard what Captain Martin said. He was too full of his own news. He pulled at Martin's sleeve. "Come with me—you too, Haney. I've got something to show you that will make your hair stand on end."

Martin had no more laughter in him—nor any more words. We followed Neilson down the central catwalk and into his laboratory.

On a table there, he had pieces of the asteroid in various stages of analysis. "I won't bore you with details of instrumental readings. There are more obvious and more startling ways to show you the truth. Look."

He pointed to a conical pile of rock-dust, took an ordinary pocket comb from his vest and moved it toward the pile. The stuff got out of the way. That's the only way to express it. The rock-dust moved to either side, leaving a pathway through the pile for Neilson's pocket comb.

"I had the devil's own time grinding that powder," Neilson said. "Here—pick up one of those pieces and put it into the mill."

Martin reached forward.

"You'll have to grab it," Neilson said. "It will try to get away from you."

This was true. With Martin's hand an inch away, the rock spun this way and that—like a mouse looking for a

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way out of a trap. Then it skittered across the table and hid behind a mixing bowl. I stared in sheer unbelief. And Martin, even after what he'd gone through, was visibly shaken.

"Grab it quickly," Neilson said. There was the eagerness in him of a child with a bright new discovery. Nothing of loathing or fear.

Martin reached around the bowl and got the rock. Immediately his hand began pumping up and down as though he were waving to a friend with a closed fist.

"See?" Neilson cried. "It has strength! It's alive! Put it in the mill."

Martin set his features, exerted considerable muscle power and slowly forced the rock down into the mixer. He withdrew his hand quickly and Neilson slammed down the lid.

INSTANTLY a clatter sounded inside the cast-iron bowl. Martin was still dazed. "It's—it's trying to get out," he muttered.

"Exactly," Neilson said. "It has life. And not only life. It can think! It's living material with intelligence! Do you realize what that means, Captain? We may answer questions now that have kept science wondering since the dawn of thought. This may be the key to creation—this stuff! Primal! Elemental!"

Martin wasn't listening. He poked a finger at the pile of dust on the table—saw the powder pull back and leave a conical hole. "A live asteroid," he muttered. "It ate Fleeson—swallowed him up and closed its mouth over him."

"Be very quiet now," Neilson told us. "Be quiet and listen."

He snapped on the mill switch and it growled deeply as its teeth bit into the rock.

But there was something else—a horror laid upon all the other horrors to cool my blood and weaken my knees.

The rock in the mill was sobbing, moaning. The sound was very faint over the grinding of the mill but it could be heard. A sound to make me think a man—a woman—a child, had been thrown bodily into a place of torture.

The sound of human agony.

Martin's eyes were glued to the table. I followed them—and froze anew. Neilson—intent upon the mill—was leaning with one hand on the table-edge. And toward his hand, in a menacing stream, moved the pile of asteroid dust. Like a snake, the stuff traveled in a sinuous rhythm. Without a head, without a body, with no apparent means of containing life, it moved towards Neilson's hand, bent upon vengeance.

I yelled and Neilson jerked his hand away. Immediately the movement of the powder stopped. The column of particles was without motion for a moment. Then the furthest end of the dust stream reversed direction to reform itself into a pile—like a snake seeking strength within a deadly coil.

Neilson's reaction was still entirely that of a scientist. The creeping horror of this phenomonon was lost upon him.

"I must trap all these specimens," he said. "But first I must discover what materials will contain them. It's entirely possible the powder can work its way through heavy metals."

Martin went to his cabin to rest and I returned to the pilot room. It was a glum ship that night, with more than one man awakening to look apprehensively at the floor as though he expected to find the asteroid eating its way up toward us.

Why Martin didn't order a jet-off, I'll never know, but he posted a watch inside the ship and the rest of us slept through two rises and settings of the blue sun. All except Neilson, who

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worked on feverishly with his strange dust.

And, upon awakening, I had that quick feeling it had all been a nightmare, because I heard shouts in the ready-room and ran up the catwalk to find them just taking Fleeson in through the air-lock.

THERE WAS nothing wrong with Fleeson that the eye could perceive. In fact he was extraordinarily cheerful and beyond all doubt glad to get back.

Martin came in and Fleeson greeted him with a hurt expression—almost a pout. "Why'd you guys run away from—I mean, why did you desert me, sir?"

Martin's consternation was pathetic to see. "Good God! We thought you were dead! That rock swallowed you up. I saw it with my own eyes!"

Martin searched the room with a look of appeal. Nixon and Leary were standing by.

"You saw it too—both of you! The rock opened like a mouth and swallowed him up. Tell them you saw it too."

The pair were in a bad way. They nodded in unison and seemed not able to believe Fleeson stood before them.

The jet wiper rubbed his wrists with either hand as though to restore circulation. He grinned, indicating himself to be too happy about his return to hold a grudge. "Well, I'll take your word for it. Can't say myself exactly what did happen except that there was a blackout in my mind somehow. I'm sure of that, because I came to under that blue sun lying on a flat rock. I was all alone and started back but night hit before I made it and this blasted asteroid's plenty cold after dark. The thermometer shoots down like a plumb-bob."

"You'd better get some sleep," Martin muttered, and hurried out of the room.

There was a strange, confused atmosphere now. Only light duties, of course, but the men went about them literally on tiptoe. And no one passed a port without stopping to peer out at the bleak, silent asteroid upon which we sat. There were whispered conferences among the men and the gossip took a new turn.

But withal, a natural one. It was said a deep emnity lay between Martin and Fleeson. There were details bruited about of a quarrel they'd had back on Earth; some falling out over a girl. Entirely fictitious, of course, and without any logical foundation whatsoever, but with twelve men cooped up in a ship and surrounded by a nameless terror, no logic is needed as a basis for whisperings.

Nixon and Leary were shunned by the rest as co-conspirators with Captain Martin. I didn't like the look of things at all.

Finally I decided to ask Martin, point blank, as to his plans. This necessitated knocking on his door. He'd spent ten solid hours in seclusion and there had been no sign of his coming forth voluntarily.

There was no reaction to my knock so I tried again. Silence beyond the door. I turned the knob. It was unlocked. I went inside.

I found Captain Martin stretched on the floor with his throat torn out. He'd been dead for some hours.

This tragedy put me in command of the ship and in order to stave off a mutiny there was one thing I had to do.

Throw Fleeson into irons.

IN THE minds of the men, the Captain's murder bore out and verified their wild rumor-mongering. I gave the order sadly enough because I couldn't believe, in my heart, that Fleeson was guilty. The man protested his innocence with such sincerity that he was either telling the truth or had

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talent as an actor.

Thankful I was that I would not have to pass final judgment. Back on Earth, he'd get a fair trial and would no doubt be exonerated.

But in the meantime, a man had been murdered on the ship. And if I believed Fleeson innocent, I had to concede that a murderer stalked free among us. I made my views on the subject entirely clear to the men and cautioned them against laxness in any form. A murderer who struck once could strike again.

I also ordered an immediate jet-off for Earth. We left the accursed asteroid behind, but a sense of foreboding and danger rode with us in the *Sir Francis Drake* and every man eyed his neighbor with suspicion. An unhealthy situation to have in the quarantine of a space ship.

Only Neilson lived in a cheerful world of his own. He was not unmindful of the tragedy, but his zest for the scientific overshadowed all else.

One day he called me in for a conference. "I've made tremendous progress," he said. "Exact scientific progress. But far more interesting are the theories I've formulated concerning this living matter. I think before long I'll be able to prove them."

"What are your theories?" I asked.

"I believe," he replied. "that the asteroid we just left is a living, thinking entity: a complete and sensitive thing, made up of living particles that function even when separated from the asteroid as independent, conscious units."

It was a big mouthful, more than I could follow in my present worried state. But there were other theories to come.

"I do not as yet know by what process the material achieves thought, but I mean to find out. When we come Earthside, I'll have help and instruments with which to work. In the meantime I have been led to believe, from certain reactions, that we are dealing with a proud and stubborn stuff."

Strange words. "Proud? I don't get it."

"The material has a distinct hostility toward us. Of that I am sure. Suppose this hostility springs from resentment of our landing? Somehow I have a feeling that's it. The asteroid must be likened in our minds to a race of proud people. In some of my tests, the reactions indicate it."

Neilson's eyes grew dreamy as he pirouetted through the realms of his fancy. "Suppose that asteroid—this stone-dust substance—considered us invaders who had violated the sanctity of its great body by landing a space ship thereon? Interesting, what?"

"There is one point you overlooked."

"I did?"

"Yes. If your theory is true, then why did the asteroid give up Fleeson after swallowing him? There was certainly nothing hostile in allowing him to come back to the ship."

Neilson was crestfallen. "That's right. It seems as though I'll have to come up with another theory."

I left him puttering about his reports and went back to the pilot room. It was the last time I saw him alive. That night he died.

IT WAS about three A. M. I was dozing in the pilot's chair, but was not entirely out because I heard the chronograph chime the hour. Three A. M. and there came a feeling to clear my mind—to awaken me.

A feeling of immediacy and sharp dread.

There was nothing unusual in this silent warning. Men who carry great responsibilities are often sensitive to faint etheric vibration. So it was with me. I sprang out of my chair certain that something was terribly wrong.

I moved down the catwalk and

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came to Neilson's laboratory. The door was open. Neilson lay just inside. His head had been twisted around and around until it now hung limp. His right arm was broken and his left leg bent against the joint at the knee until the tip of his toe now touched his groin.

I moved on down the catwalk. To Fleeson's cell. The steel door was off its hinges. Fleeson was gone.

On—into the sleeping quarters.

Sickening—horrible. Death, but in gentler, more cunning, form. Six men lying at attention on their cots. Each one with a mutilated neck. They'd been killed in utter silence—one by one—while all slept quietly awaiting their turn. All dead. Wholesale slaughter.

I went out of the room and discovered Fleeson had somehow eluded me in the passageway because now he was back in Neilson's laboratory and he had not been there before. As I entered Fleeson got up from the floor where he had been reverently sweeping asteroid dust into a pile. He came to his feet and faced me, standing erect and unafraid. The eyes that bored into mine were filled with contempt.

Then, transferring the contempt to his hands, he raised them and tore the clothing from his body, gripping the cloth near his throat and pulling downward with a powerful wrenching until his clothing was in shreds and he stood stark naked.

Then he took into his hands the loose skin over his neck muscles on either side. He pulled downward, tearing the skin from his body—ripping it away like a garment.

And his skin *had been* only a garment. He threw the last of his flesh to the floor and stood there.

A stone man.

I knew now why Fleeson had been allowed to return. It hadn't been Fleeson at all. They had used Fleeson and the asteroid itself had come into the ship.

The stone man moved toward me. I grappled with him.

HANEY seemed to sense the exact moment Morton Parnell finished reading the report. Lying back, with his eyes closed, Haney said,

"Any questions, sir?"

Parnell laid the report on the table. "It isn't quite complete. Six dead men in the sleeping quarters. Martin and Neilson. Eight out of twelve. Subtracting yourself, that leaves three unaccounted for."

Haney did not move nor open his eyes. "Doran, Bacon, Wilson. They were needed to bring the ship back."

"I don't understand."

Haney got up from his chair. "They died later,—close to Earth." He moved toward Parnell. "Neilson was right. A proud asteroid. Determined to wipe out the stain of its violation."

"I don't—"

"Determined to execute all who violated it."

Haney moved closer to Parnell. "And those *responsible*."

Haney reached out.

Parnell felt Haney's hands on his throat. Hard hands.

Hands of rock in gloves of flesh.

THE END

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RAIDERS from MARS

How would we combat a future invasion from the red world? What weapons can we use to beat them back; destroy them?

ON our back cover you will see the artist's conception of raiding ships in countless numbers circling in from space preparatory to swooping down on an unsuspecting planet. If such a thing did occur, say in 1975, how might the people of Earth then combat it? Let us picture 1975.

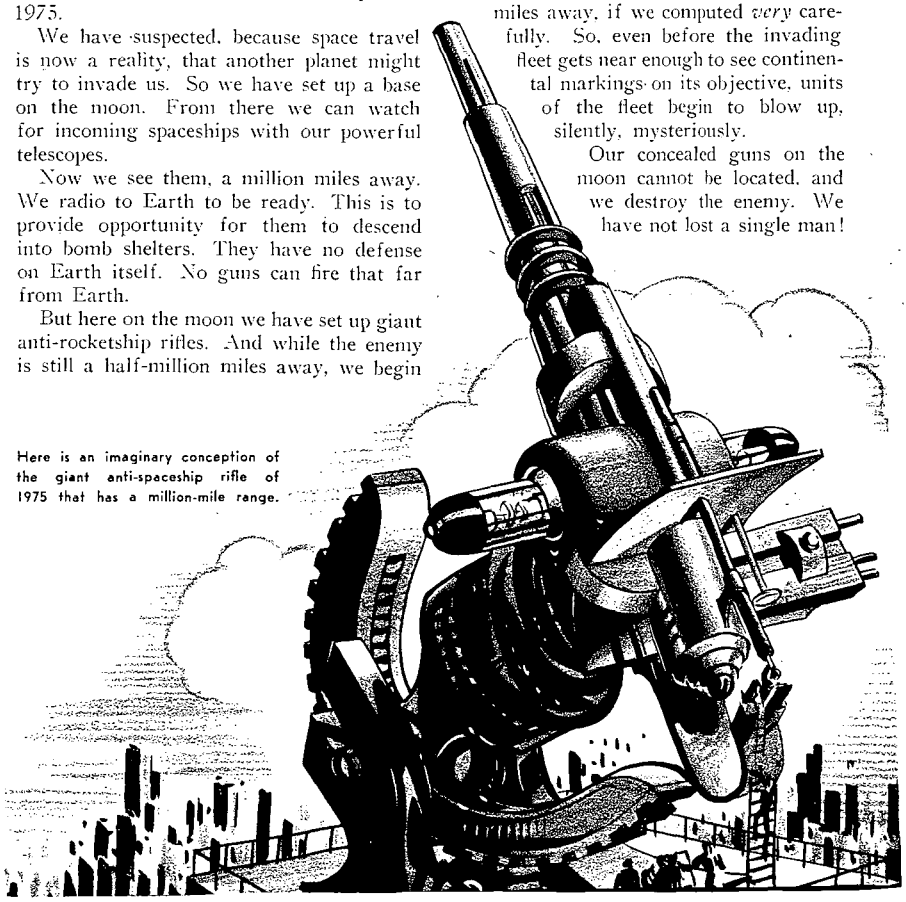
We have suspected, because space travel is now a reality, that another planet might try to invade us. So we have set up a base on the moon. From there we can watch for incoming spaceships with our powerful telescopes.

Now we see them, a million miles away. We radio to Earth to be ready. This is to provide opportunity for them to descend into bomb shelters. They have no defense on Earth itself. No guns can fire that far from Earth.

But here on the moon we have set up giant anti-rocketship rifles. And while the enemy is still a half-million miles away, we begin firing huge projectiles at a certain point on the course of the invading ships, which has been computed for us by our astronomer rangefinders.

Due to the moon's slight gravity, and lack of atmosphere, we can aim with incredible accuracy. We might hit a ship ten million miles away, if we computed *very* carefully. So, even before the invading fleet gets near enough to see continental markings on its objective, units of the fleet begin to blow up, silently, mysteriously.

Our concealed guns on the moon cannot be located, and we destroy the enemy. We have not lost a single man!



Here is an imaginary conception of the giant anti-spaceship rifle of 1975 that has a million-mile range.

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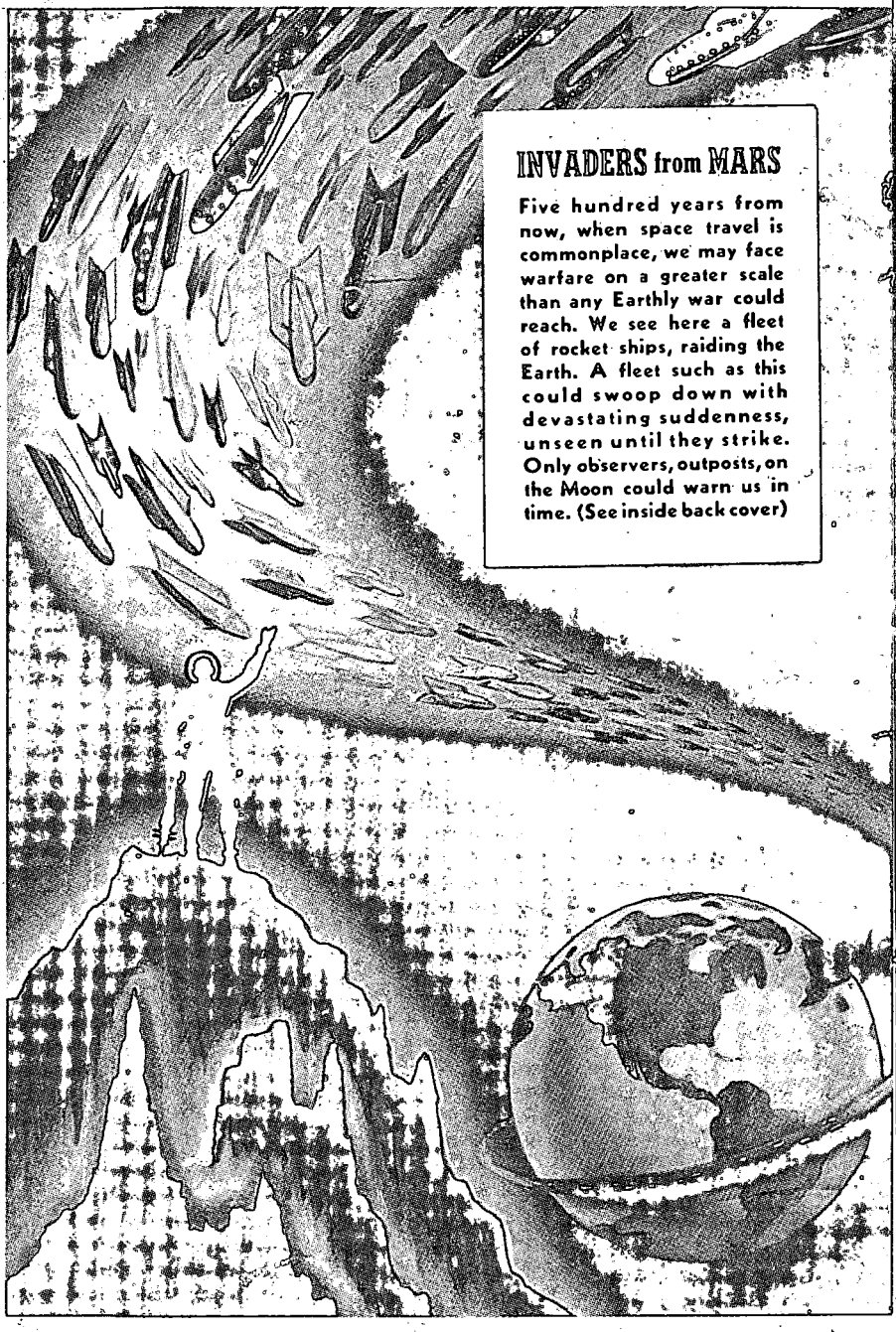
INVADERS from MARS
Five hundred years from now, when space travel is commonplace, we may face warfare on a greater scale than any Earthly war could reach. We see here a fleet of rocket ships, raiding the Earth. A fleet such as this could swoop down with devastating suddenness, unseen until they strike. Only observers, outposts, on the Moon could warn us in time. (See inside back cover)

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